

A Gentle Touch

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A Gentle Touch

by [Dancingdog](#)

Summary

Something terrible happened to Alastor in his human life and when he wakes up in Hell, he finds himself as prey for the vicious sinners around him. Desperate, he makes a deal he comes to regret.

Vox is fascinated by the deadly, untouchable Radio Demon and somehow manages to charm the man who initially wanted his head. They strike up a friendship that leads to some fluttery feelings on both ends, but before anything can develop, Alastor's deal (and a certain moth-demon) cause complications.

Misunderstandings and broken hearts ensue, and a blossoming romance sours into something messy and hateful.

And then Alastor disappears for 7 years. When he returns, his fight with Adam leaves him wounded and vulnerable, and Vox decides that it's time to put an end to the man who destroyed both his heart and his afterlife.

But his complicated feelings for Alastor won't let him end his life and it turns out that they miss each other more than either of them realised. Can they salvage the ashes of their relationship, or will Valentino and questionable deals destroy them both?

Notes

This idea stems from a couple of observations from the show: 1. Alastor being so touch-averse, and 2. Alastor's shadow seemingly revealing his true emotions. Hopefully, this won't be as long as *Addicted* but I'm never very good at sticking to word counts. It will have a happy ending though, because there aren't enough reciprocated RadioStatic fics in the world :)

Chapter 1: A Man, His Shadow, And A Magic Bookshop

Alastor ran, leaving the dead bodies slumped in the alleyway.

His chest heaved, ears flat to his skull as he took a sharp left and cut through a small park, putting more distance between himself and the two deceased sinners. They would regenerate at some point, and he didn't want to stick around for that.

This late at night Hell was dark, with shadows lurking around every corner and depraved, bloodthirsty, *lustful* sinners lay in wait for the perfect opportunity to strike. Alastor stumbled, flinching when he caught sight of a wicked smile and the glint of a knife beside a nearby bush, and he scrambled to his feet and pushed himself faster as he tried to focus on the darkness surrounding him, at manipulating his own body to melt into the shadows.

After the third failed attempt and his second stumble, he gave up and poured all of his attention into running. He couldn't dissolve into the shadows when he was panicking.

Fear was a shining beacon to the cruellest of demons however, and Alastor was blindsided by the panther-like sinner that leapt from the nearest tree and slammed him into the dirt. Claws sunk into his flesh as the sinner grinned viciously and adrenaline coursed through Alastor's veins as he swiped at the feline face.

The other sinner caught his hand easily, impaling his palm with a sharp claw and Alastor sucked in a breath as a tongue swept up his throat, slow and *threatening*.

"What a pretty thing you are," purred the sinner and Alastor couldn't *breathe*. First the two shark demons and now this panther sinner? He should have stayed in Cannibal Town this evening. Rosie had warned him about the sort of people that lived in other towns. He shouldn't have let his curiosity entice him.

A tail curled around his thigh and white hot panic drove Alastor's instincts. He unleashed his shadow and it let out a silent snarl before pouncing on his attacker's silhouette and dragging it by the tail. The panther-like sinner hissed and clawed Alastor's face, leaving a set of bloody

gashes in his cheek, and Alastor's shadow roared wordlessly before springing upon the sinner's back and tearing into him mercilessly.

Alastor scrambled away a few feet, watching with wide eyes and shaking hands as his shadow brutalised the sinner. It ripped and bit and clawed and hit anything it could reach and Alastor watched as the sinner's struggles grew weaker and weaker as he failed to grasp the formless entity. Crimson liquid painted the grass and Alastor swallowed as the sinner fell limp. Still, his shadow was relentless, only satisfied once the sinner was a mangled lump of fur and muscle, mutilated beyond recognition.

Alastor realised he was shaking. He caught his shadow's gaze and its crude mouth pulled into a gleeful smile, shoulders shaking with laughter. Alastor stared at it, frozen with terror, and it suddenly stopped and grinned at him before sprinting towards him on all fours like a feral beast.

With a gasp, Alastor crawled backwards, eyes widening as the entity closed the distance between them and he threw his hands over his bleeding face to protect himself as his own silhouette launched itself at him. He fell backwards, winded, as the shadow melted into him and he sucked in a laboured breath as his nails dug into the soil.

With some difficulty, he dragged himself upright, stiffening when he caught sight of his silhouette smirking at him before it stilled and became dormant once more, and Alastor was left staring at a regular shadow.

He licked his lips and glanced at the third corpse of the night.

He pushed himself onto weak legs and ran a hand through his hair, grimacing when he cut his finger on his own elongated antlers. He forced them into their smaller size and sucked the cut on his finger as he inspected the hole in his palm. He would have to bandage that before he re-entered Cannibal Town.

There was a rustle behind him and Alastor wasted no time in fleeing the park.

He ran as fast as he could, uncaring of where he ended up as long as he was *alone*.

He spotted a bookshop and veered towards it. There was something soothing about a bookshop; something comforting and *safe* about the smell of old paper, a dim tungsten lamp, and a thin layer of dust. Bookshops were uncommon in the Pride Ring, mostly because sinners rarely sought pleasure in reading, so it was unlikely that anyone would be hiding inside.

Unsurprisingly, the door was unlocked and Alastor pushed inside. He locked himself in and found a leather armchair to collapse into in a far corner of the room, shielded by towering bookcases. He wrapped his arms around himself and exhaled slowly.

“Are you new here?”

A lamp flicked on beside him and Alastor bristled, ears flicking rapidly as they tried to locate the source of the hushed voice. He sprung out of the chair and pressed his back against the wall, eyes darting from left to right as his pulse picked up speed. He couldn’t catch a break for one minute, could he?

“Relax, I won’t bite,” said the disembodied feminine voice.

“Show yourself,” he growled.

A chuckle. “I can taste your fear from here, little one. What’s your name?”

Alastor eyed his escape route. He sprinted between the bookshelves but yelped when a heavy case toppled over, nearly crushing him. He jumped backwards as the next case toppled over, and the one beside it, like huge dominoes one after another. The books crashed onto the floor and Alastor realised he would have to clamber over the shelves if he wanted to get to the door.

The lamp flickered.

“Funny things, bookshops,” sighed the voice, and it reminded Alastor of a cool wind weaving between the browned leaves of a dying flower, stripping it bare, exposing it to the sun and rain and ice whilst promising that it was doing the flower a favour, that by taking its leaves it wouldn’t have to feed them and it could focus on regenerating itself, and the flower wouldn’t know that the wind had taken away the tools it needed to feed itself.

“There’s a certain magic to them,” continued the voice as Alastor began climbing over the fallen bookcases. “They’re special. They hold so many secrets, so much knowledge. There’s power in a bookshop. Are you listening to me, Alastor?”

Alastor froze as his fingers touched the door lock. “...Why ask for my name if you already know it?” he asked quietly.

“I wanted to see if you would talk to me.”

Alastor swallowed, an ominous feeling settling in his gut. He tested the lock and found it jammed. “...What do you want?”

“To chat,” replied the voice and Alastor could hear the smile in its tone. “I’m lonely.”

Alastor wiggled the lock, pursing his lips when it didn’t budge. “How do you know who I am?”

“I know a lot of things,” said the voice lightly and it sounded amused. “I like to people-watch.”

“Who are you?” *Where* are you?

Alastor glanced around the dimly-lit shop. There didn’t appear to be anyone else in the room.

“A fairy tale,” hummed the voice. “A monster in the darkness. Something humans and demons and angels fear. A myth. I am the Beginning and the End.”

Alastor could hear the blood rushing between his ears. The lamp flickered again and the room felt strangely cold. “What do you want from me?” he asked quietly.

Another chuckle. “You came to me. I think the question should be: What do *you* want from *me*?”

Alastor scowled. “I want you to unlock this door.”

“Not just yet,” said the voice and the words tickled Alastor’s ears like a gentle breeze. He gripped the door handle tighter. “What were you running from, little one?”

Alastor pressed his lips together, eyes narrowing and the voice tutted playfully.

“Come now, sweet fawn. What sort of monsters were chasing you through the night? Perhaps they were similar to the three that chased you through the streets of Louisiana?”

Alastor’s eyes widened and his skin grew pale and clammy.

“Do you remember them? Big, scary monsters cloaked by shadows. First they caught the doe, then they went after the fawn, all while the stag was at the watering hole.”

“Who are you?” Alastor whispered as his hands began to tremble. He balled them into fists.

“You have a problem with men, don’t you, Alastor? You don’t like them.”

Alastor bared his teeth at the empty room and he could feel his shadow clawing at his insides, screeching silently and prowling around its cage like a wild animal. It was excited for another fight and Alastor was afraid of what it might do if it broke free. Where would it turn when it realised there was no physical enemy to maul? Would it focus its aggression on Alastor instead?

“Particularly men with power,” said the voice, like a whistling wind. “Your heart starts to race and your knees begin to shake and you get a lump in your throat, don’t you? You see a powerful man and you get all weak and wobbly, like a little fawn.”

“Enough,” Alastor hissed as bile crawled up his throat and memories assaulted his brain, clear as the day they happened.

“How do you think Bambi felt when the hunter shot his mother?”

“Enough!” Alastor snarled and he realised his mistake too late. He tried to shut the cage again but his shadow was already free. He pinned himself against the door, standing perfectly still as the entity scoured the shop, tossing books carelessly and shoving fallen bookcases around as though they were made of cardboard. The more it searched, the more furious it became and its limbs began to stretch and it grew taller and taller until it towered over Alastor, mouth gaping and claws outstretched.

Alastor stared at it fearfully and its malicious smirk pulled wider. It laughed silently at Alastor’s cowering and suddenly hurled him across the room. His spine hit a shelf and he cried out in pain before the shadow sped across the room on all fours and raked its claws through Alastor’s wounded cheek.

Alastor whimpered and tried to drag himself away, but the shadow grabbed his ankle and hauled him closer before pouncing on him and digging its claws through his chest with a wicked grin. He kicked out and attempted to throw its much larger body off him, but it had no physical form and it laughed wildly at his frustration.

“Control your shadow, Alastor,” whispered the feminine voice and Alastor grit his teeth.

“I can’t!” he yelled as his silhouette drove its claws into his soft stomach with an excited grin.

“You are its master.”

“I *can*’t!” he snarled and the shadow grew even more enthusiastic at his mounting anger. It lifted his shirt and he howled as its knife-like teeth clamped around his side and ripped through muscle. Tears of agony collected in his eyes.

“It is a part of you, Alastor. It feels what you feel. It feeds off your emotions. You lack control and discipline and so does your shadow.”

He screamed as the shadow tore a chunk of his flesh off.

“Lock the monster away, sweet fawn. Just like you did to the ones that murdered your darling mother.”

Alastor’s thoughts turned back to that evening and his pain dulled as he remembered what he had done to his mother’s killers. He flexed his fingers, remembering the weight of the axe and his pulse slowed as he glared at his silhouette. The shadow stilled, looking uncertain for the first time.

Alastor narrowed his eyes and the shadow stepped off him, backing away almost nervously as he stood and advanced on it, feeling the solid wood of the axe handle in his palm as though it was physically there, in his grasp.

“Get back in your cage,” Alastor growled and the shadow paused before its mouth stretched into another grin and it reached for Alastor.

Alastor remembered swinging the axe, remembered the blood spattering over his shirt, the dull thud and sickening *crack* as the axe landed. He remembered swinging it a couple more

times to finish the job. The blade had been blunter than he'd expected and the first blow hadn't been *quite* enough.

He watched his silhouette leap backwards, clutching its chest with wide eyes. There was a new tear in the void of blackness, like a second gaping mouth. It looked at Alastor in shock.

"Get back in your cage," Alastor said darkly.

The shadow stared at him a moment longer before dissolving into him once more. He sucked in a sharp breath and suddenly, the burning agony returned and he collapsed to his knees, holding his side.

"You have potential," whispered the voice.

Alastor tentatively lifted his shirt, grimacing at the deep wound. He definitely couldn't return to Cannibal Town like this...

"You hold more power than you think, little one."

Alastor closed his eyes wearily. "Let me go."

"What if I said I could give you more power? Power that could grant you respect. Power that could make people *fear* you. No one would dare lay a hand on you ever again."

Alastor hesitated at the temptation. "And let me guess... You want my soul in return?" he asked drily. He might have been in Hell for less than six months, with little control over the abilities he had been gifted upon arrival, but he wasn't stupid. First rule of Hell: Don't sell your soul to an Overlord. Rosie had taught him that despite being an Overlord herself. She seemed to have a soft spot for him.

Even if he wasn't addressing an Overlord, he certainly wouldn't be making any soul-binding deals with a disembodied voice.

"No."

He frowned. "Then what do you want in return?"

"I want you to invoke terror in the hearts of your enemies."

Alastor narrowed his eyes. *What?*

Another chuckle at his confused expression. "Or hurt them. Torture them, break their hearts. I don't care what sort of evil you inflict on them, which emotions you make them feel, just bring them here when you're finished with them."

"Why?" he asked warily. "What will you do with them?"

"So many questions," hummed the voice. "Do we have a deal or not?"

The lamp died, shrouding the bookshop in darkness. Alastor startled when a contract appeared in the centre of the room, hovering above the floor and shimmering silver. Its black print glittered invitingly and Alastor felt strangely drawn to it before he shook his head and scowled.

"No," he said as he shuffled awkwardly towards the door, holding his side.

The contract slid in front of him, blocking his path.

“They’ll keep chasing you,” said the voice. “All the monsters and horrors of Hell. They think you’re *pretty*.”

Alastor stiffened, nausea bubbling in his stomach.

“You could teach them a lesson, sweet fawn. Take my offer and no one will touch you ever again. That is what you want, isn’t it? To make all those hungry wolves leave you alone? To feel *safe*?”

He eyed the contract and swallowed.

“Those three monsters are down here, you know? They’re big and strong and they can’t keep their hands to themselves. What would you do, little one, if they caught you? Would you cry for help from an uncaring crowd of demons? Would you struggle and ignore their wicked smiles? How do you stop something that’s already dead? Something that can regenerate and keep coming back for more?”

Alastor’s fingers curled into his shirt as he wrapped his arms around himself again, seeking warmth and comfort, trying to forget the cool rain that had seeped into his skin that fateful evening.

“I can help you stop them, sweet fawn, and then I can make them disappear.”

A black pen hovered beside the contract.

“You’ll be *untouchable*.”

Alastor’s fingers closed around the pen.

The moment he had finished reading the contract and signed his name, there was an echo of laughter and a thick, black chain snapped around his throat. He gasped and tugged frantically

at it, ears flat and eyes wide.

“I thought you didn’t want my soul?” he shouted.

“I don’t *want* it, little one, but I do *need* it.” There was a smile in the voice. “You should have read the fine print.”

The contract flipped over to reveal writing on the back of the page.

By signing this contract, I hereby willingly offer my soul and free will to my eternal master and creator of this contract, with the understanding that if I do not fulfil the terms of the agreement, my eternal master may extinguish my soul permanently.

Alastor shook his head frantically. “You can’t do that! You- You *tricked* me!”

Another round of laughter, this one crueller than the others. “Then you should learn not to be so naive. You’re in Hell, after all.”

The contract vanished, plunging Alastor into darkness. Suddenly, a tendril of sparkling black and silver light spiralled down to him and he watched, entranced, as it slithered around him like a snake, warm and enticing before it slid between his lips.

He gagged, feeling as though he was choking, and he swiped blindly at thin air as the light poured into him, filling him as though it were a solid object. He tried to close his mouth but couldn’t and he made a strangled noise as it fell heavy on his tongue and forced itself down his throat.

Finally, the light was gone and Alastor trembled violently, putting a hand over his mouth as he tried not to vomit. Tears prickled his eyes.

“Take some time to test your new limits,” breathed the voice, sounding amused. “Shape a reputation for yourself. And once you’ve done all that, find your enemies, find some *Overlords*, warm them up for me, then bring them here.”

Alastor stared numbly into the darkness as memories battered his mind like a stormy sea.

“Did you hear me, sweet fawn?”

He nodded, silent and shaking.

“You look so sad, little one. Let me fix that.”

The corners of his mouth pulled upwards into a painfully tight smile and he clawed at his own face as two needles passed through his skin and muscle, sewing the agonising grin into place with ethereal threads.

He screamed through clenched teeth.

“A smile is a valuable tool,” said the voice calmly as the threads began to knot themselves. “It inspires your friends, keeps your enemies guessing, and ensures that no matter what comes your way... you’re the one in control.”

Alastor whimpered and touched the sutures with shaking fingers. They *burned*.

There was the sound of a lock opening.

Alastor sprinted towards the door.

“See you soon, little fawn.”

He threw himself into the street and raced away from the bookshop to the sound of soft laughter.

Chapter 2: The Clever Man From The Picturebox

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Perhaps being on camera all these years had made him extra alert, but Vox knew when he was being watched.

He was careful not to react, tidying up his dressing room and keeping one eye on the mirror for any movement. As usual he was the last one in the building. He liked reading the evening news, but it did mean that he was often the one who locked up and Hell wasn't exactly a safe place to be when you were alone.

A shadow moved and Vox watched a rather dapper demon step out of it. He was smiling, as though he knew a terrible secret.

Two could play at that game. He plastered on a grin of his own as he turned to the other sinner and he took a proper look at his company as he stepped into the light. Vox blinked, a strange thrill shooting up his spine. He knew this man.

“Good evening! It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Alastor,” he greeted cheerfully. “What brings you here at this late hour?”

Alastor smiled lazily as he glanced around the dressing room. “A pleasure to meet you too, quite a pleasure.” His voice was affected by his radio filters but Vox couldn't say that he found the sound unpleasant. In fact, it was strangely charming. “I thought I would like to meet the man in the picture box. You've got quite a following. Congratulations.”

Vox arched an eyebrow and couldn't help but stand a little taller at the praise. “A fraction of your audience, but once I get out of here and start my own company, I might become your biggest competition.” He winked and Alastor looked at him in amusement before he began strolling around the dressing room, cane bouncing off the floor in a steady rhythm as he inspected the various props and other items Vox had stashed in the room.

“You have big dreams,” Alastor commented and Vox shook his head.

“Dreams are for those who merely imagine. I have *ambitions*.”

Alastor cocked an eyebrow at him, pausing his exploration. “I don’t doubt it. You’re already an Overlord and you’ve been dead, what? Barely three years?”

Vox puffed his chest out a little, smile becoming a fraction more genuine. “I have a few souls on my chain. Although it probably seems like pocket change to you.”

Alastor hummed and scanned the room slowly once more before facing Vox fully. “Everyone has to begin somewhere. I remember starting off like you, with a small radio show that grew in popularity.”

Vox raked his gaze over the Radio Demon’s form. He was a handsome creature, well-spoken and smartly dressed. He was entirely Vox’s type, despite his vicious reputation.

“Well, I’d love to hear some tips over coffee somewhere,” he said, testing the waters, trying to figure out how tonight would play out.

Alastor’s smile grew slightly more dangerous.

So, Vox was correct. This wasn’t a social visit.

Still, he didn’t let his charming smile slip. “Not a coffee drinker?”

“I prefer tea, actually,” Alastor replied, gaze locked with Vox’s. “Do you mind if I hang my coat up?”

“Not at all.”

The rack was beside Vox. He watched Alastor approach and shifted out of his way to allow him to hang his coat. His back was to Vox but his ears had rotated, listening intently to Vox’s every movement.

Vox decided to admire the view for a moment before he cleared his throat.

“So, what do I have to do to keep you from killing me?”

Alastor froze then turned to him with an intrigued gaze. Vox continued to smile lazily at him.

“What makes you think I’m going to kill you?” Alastor asked, tilting his head a little.

Vox chuckled. “You were watching me for twelve minutes before you decided to reveal yourself. I figured you were waiting for the tech guy to leave the bathroom.”

The Radio Demon’s eyes brightened with curiosity. “Perceptive,” he purred. “Why didn’t you run?”

Vox shrugged. “What’s the point? You’d have caught me anyway. I’m no match for you.” He smirked. “Also, why should I give you the satisfaction of a chase? You might feel like you’ve *earned* the kill. No, I’d rather make this as easy and unsatisfying for you as possible.”

A huffed laugh fell from Alastor’s lips. “I see. That’s... different.”

“So,” said Vox, crossing his arms. “How do I convince you that I’m not worth the effort of killing?”

Alastor seemed happy to humour him for now. “Well, you’ve definitely caught my attention, so you’d better figure it out quickly.”

“I could try a couple of magic tricks. Guess your card. Pull a rabbit out of a hat,” Vox said and Alastor leaned casually against the wall.

“You know a few tricks?”

“Absolutely not, but it might be entertaining to watch me go through a whole deck of cards before I guess the correct one.”

Alastor grinned. “Sounds fun. Go fetch your cards.”

Vox nodded and jerked a thumb at the door. “Great. They’re back at my place. Just give me an hour or so to get them...”

Alastor chuckled and it was a pleasant sound, despite the circumstances. “Perceptive *and* witty. Aren’t you a double threat?”

Vox winked and made no move to escape. There was no point; he might as well save his energy for the fight he was about to lose.

“I could serenade you with a heavy metal drum solo?” Vox said and Alastor’s gaze filled with amusement.

“Let me guess... Your drum kit is at home too?”

Vox shook his head. “I don’t play drums. Give me a few weeks to learn and meet me back here, yeah?”

Alastor chuckled again and Vox found himself genuinely smiling. It was strangely easy to talk to Alastor - even with the threat of death hanging over him. Only Vox would have good chemistry with the man about to murder him...

"I'm afraid I can't wait that long," Alastor sighed, flexing his fingers around his cane. From the corner of his eye, Vox caught a shadow flicker and shift.

"I get it. You're a busy guy. You need to get the job done quickly. Can I ask you something?"

"Are you going to ask why I want to kill you?"

Vox shook his head, tone light. "How do you feel about the rising costs of electricity?"

Alastor frowned in confusion. "Rising costs of-?"

Vox grabbed Alastor's arm and sent 400 volts of electricity coursing through his nervous system and the Radio Demon was blasted into the back wall as Vox whirled around and raced for the door.

"I think it's *shocking!*" Vox called over his shoulder as he crashed through the nearest window and fell two stories onto the street below.

He rolled to his feet and sprinted away from the studio, cutting through a narrow alley only to grind to a halt when Alastor stepped out from a shadow and blocked his path.

"I like that one," Alastor said, still smiling as he dusted himself off. "You know, I think there's a bit of a *spark* between us."

Vox choked as one of Alastor's infamous shadows wrapped around his neck like a Boa Constrictor and threw him into the fence. It broke beneath his weight and when he next

looked up, the Radio Demon was looming above him, the end of his cane pressed against Vox's chest.

"I distinctly remember you saying you wouldn't run," Alastor drawled.

Vox mustered up a smile as he leaned back on his hands. "Who's running? I just popped out for a quick smoke."

Alastor tutted. "Those things will kill you. You should take better care of yourself."

Vox huffed a laugh before he found his smile fading. "So... why *do* you want to kill me? I'm hardly your competition. I have a little over a dozen souls under my belt... Why the sudden interest in me?"

"My dear, if I wanted you dead, your body would already be scattered across your dressing room."

Vox raised his eyebrows. "Then what's with the theatrics? This is a strange way of asking for an autograph."

Alastor chuckled. "I never said my intentions were innocent. I still have to find an Overlord by the end of the night and I *was* going to scare you a little, but I've somehow failed miserably at that. Now, I could inflict a tremendous amount of pain upon you, but..." He frowned at Vox and his voice softened a fraction. "But I'd rather not do that."

Vox's eyes widened. *Interesting*. Why did Alastor *have* to find an Overlord by the end of the night?

Vox wasn't stupid. Alastor might claim to want to spare his life but the truth was that every time the Radio Demon fought with an Overlord, the Overlord *always* disappeared. Death was only permanent by angelic weaponry, so where was Alastor taking them? What did he do to them?

Initially, Vox had assumed that Alastor was in possession of an angel blade, but perhaps it wasn't as simple as that.

"*Have* to find an Overlord?" Vox asked and Alastor raised his eyebrows, looking surprised before his expression morphed into one that was faintly impressed.

"How refreshing," Alastor said slowly. "Someone who's *listening*." He drew his gaze down the full length of Vox's body and back up again, assessing him, and Vox felt weirdly giddy. Damn, between the teasing, the cane pinning him down, and the intense looks, Vox was ten seconds away from getting on his knees and telling Alastor he could do whatever he wanted to him.

"Most Overlords would be taking a swing at me by now," Alastor pointed out. "Do you have *any* instincts of self-preservation or are you just hoping this is all going to work out alright for you?"

Vox sent him a winning grin. "I'm hoping I might be able to talk my way out of this. If I can avoid a scrap, I will. Also, you're avoiding the question. What do you mean you *have* to find an Overlord by the end of the night?"

Alastor's smile widened. "Oh, I like you. You're *different*."

"Do you like me enough to let me go?" Vox tried and Alastor stared at him for a long moment with that intense gaze that made heat flare in Vox's belly.

A black and red gloved hand reached towards him, fingers outstretched. Vox took the hand firmly and Alastor pulled him to his feet.

"I'm afraid I'm on a bit of a schedule," Alastor said, keeping hold of Vox's hand, no doubt to prevent him from running. "So I can't just 'let you go'." He tilted his head a little. "But... I suppose I *can* let you walk away from this encounter if you give me what I want."

Vox's heart raced, and not from fear. This was *exciting*. He suddenly wanted to unravel all of Alastor's mysteries and secrets, wanted to get close to him, get to know him, *learn* from him. The rumours of the Radio Demon had always painted him as a cruel and vicious beast who never let anyone get too near, but no one had ever told Vox that the man was this *electrifying*, this tantalising.

Vox wanted to be the exception to the rule. He wanted to be the Overlord that escaped. The one who got up close to Alastor instead of observing him from the other side of the fence. He wanted to make Alastor laugh, make him frustrated, make him *angry*, and he wanted to test the rumours - see how close Alastor would let him get. Vox wanted to *touch*.

"And what is it you want, Radio Demon?" purred Vox, lowering his voice as he squeezed Alastor's hand in a way that matched Alastor's teasing.

He was surprised when Alastor slid his hand from his grip, ears falling an inch lower and gaze growing a fraction harder.

He had made a mistake. He had crossed the blurred line between teasing and flirting and Alastor had immediately backed off. Vox frowned and made a mental note and he straightened, pulling his face away from Alastor's to prove that he wouldn't push any further.

Alastor blinked, looking taken aback for a moment. Perhaps he wasn't used to people reading him so easily, but Vox dealt with actors and the public every day of his life as a TV star - he knew how to read even the subtlest shift of body language. He knew when someone was uncomfortable or upset or angry or excited, even when they were trying to mask it.

Alastor's mask was old and intricate and it hid a lot, but that didn't mean it *couldn't* be removed.

"I don't want to hurt you, Vox," Alastor said quietly. "I do genuinely like you. I can see you have potential."

Vox swallowed and tried not to let it show how affected he was by the sincere praise. Validation was one of Vox's greatest weaknesses and he knew how pathetic that was, so he was careful not to let anyone know, he was careful not to *react*.

"If I can intimidate you, I won't have to resort to violence, do you understand?" Alastor asked.

Fascinating. The mystery around Alastor was only growing. Why did it sound as though he was being *forced* into this? Did Alastor confront Overlords to sustain his power? Was someone else pulling his strings? So many delicious secrets...

Vox nodded. "If you let me walk away from this, perhaps we can go for a drink some time? I have questions."

Alastor laughed in exasperation. "You're a bit of a masochist, aren't you?"

"I think you're worth the constant threat of being murdered," Vox said with a lopsided smile.

"You don't know me. I might not live up to your expectations," Alastor commented. "Perhaps I'm just the psychotic, blood-thirsty monster everyone says I am."

"Perhaps," agreed Vox as he decided whether or not to take a risk. "...Or perhaps you want everyone to think that of you so you can hide the fact that you're being *forced* to do something you don't want to do?"

A flick of an ear, a twitch at the corner of a strained smile... Alastor had quickly learned to keep his gaze steady in front of Vox but he had other tells. Vox smirked. *Gotcha.*

There was a stretch of silence before Alastor met Vox's gaze and there was an ounce of intrigue and excitement there. "My, my. Aren't you clever?" Alastor purred and there was something different about his tone, something... promising.

Vox's smile grew.

It seemed he had won Alastor over.

Alastor raked his gaze over Vox's form once more and he appeared to hesitate. Vox felt a little breathless. If Alastor hadn't responded so poorly earlier, Vox would be flirting ruthlessly right now.

Suddenly, a shadow wrapped around Vox's middle and slammed him against the building beside them. Another shadow curled around Vox's neck, tender and slow like a gentle lover before it squeezed Vox's throat just hard enough for it to be an effort for him to breathe. His feet left the floor as he was dragged higher up the side of the building and still, Alastor had yet to move, observing Vox from the corner of his eye as he drummed his fingers against his cane; his other hand held behind his back - the picture of a patient gentleman.

Damn, he's hot, thought Vox.

"I thought you said no violence?" Vox managed as the shadows gripped him tighter.

"This is mere child's play," said Alastor with a wicked smile. "I even brought you a friend."

Cast by the nearby street lamp, Alastor's silhouette twitched and moved of its own will and soon elongated into a spindly creature with sharp angles and a gaping grin - like an eerie caricature of the Radio Demon himself. It laughed silently and sped towards Vox at a daunting pace, claws outstretched as it scaled the wall.

"Frighten him but *do not hurt him*," Alastor growled and the silhouette hesitated, throwing Alastor a filthy look before hissing and grabbing Vox's silhouette by the antenna.

It *pulled* and Vox made a pained sound as he was hoisted further up the wall by the thin antenna. The other tentacle-like shadows left his body and the silhouette grinned as it released him, letting him fall from not an insignificant height. He grunted as he landed on his hands and knees, scraping them on the gravel.

The silhouette was on him again, grinning with its sharp mouth and the horns - the *antlers* - atop its head stretched impressively wide as it grabbed him by his turtleneck sweater and smashed him into the wall again, pinning him there.

Vox smirked. "Is that the best you can do?" he teased.

The shadow bristled as Alastor made an amused sound at the back of his throat.

Suddenly, the silhouette drew back its fist and rammed it into Vox's face.

"Damn it!" Vox yelled as his screen shattered, blood oozing down the glass fragments. Dozens of error codes screamed for attention in his internal messages and his vision glitched and distorted, rendering him partially blind.

He looked up to find Alastor snarling at his silhouette, his own body twisted into a nightmarish form with huge antlers, radio dials for eyes, and elongated limbs. Vox watched, stunned, as the silhouette slashed a claw through Alastor's face, drawing blood and making the Radio Demon hiss.

Vox's eyes widened when the crazed silhouette abruptly whirled on him with a menacing smile. It pounced, tearing at his clothes, raking its claws through his skin, and Vox howled as it sunk its teeth into his shoulder.

"*Enough!*" Alastor roared, throwing a hand out and commanding a few shadow tendrils to wrap around the silhouette's wrists and ankles, dragging it across the ground and towards Alastor.

It clawed at the gravel, screaming wildly yet silently and when it neared Alastor, it kicked out at him, causing him to stumble. Still, he kept a firm grip on it and he grunted as he forced it back into his body. When Vox next looked at the silhouette at Alastor's feet, it was still, with no garish smile.

Vox panted as Alastor straightened. What had he just witnessed? He knew about Alastor's wicked silhouette, but none of the rumours had mentioned that Alastor had so little control over it.

Alastor's smile was strained and he seemed out of breath, cheek wet with blood. He sent Vox a frustrated look before a growl left his lips and he stalked away, leaving Vox bruised and bloodied and confused in the alleyway.

And, despite his injuries and the little thread of fear in his chest, now Vox *had* to know more. He couldn't rest whilst there were so many secrets to be uncovered.

How much was the infamous Radio Demon hiding?

Chapter End Notes

Look at me writing a not-tragic, light-hearted Vox! Well, for now anyway.

And yes, all the chapter titles are going to look like they were ripped from a potential Fallout Boy album :)

Chapter 3: Television With A Deathwish

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The problem with being so widely feared was that other people gave away your location.

All Vox had to do was look for the bar with the most patrons creeping through the exit (and one less-than-elegant patron who had opened a window and was crawling out of it) and he was pretty certain he knew where the Radio Demon was.

He slipped into the bar and noted that the few patrons remaining were far away from Alastor, sitting at their tables with wary expressions and darting gazes. Alastor himself was perched atop a bar stool, sipping at an amber liquid as his attention was caught by whatever book he was reading. The rows of seats beside Alastor were empty and the fly-like bartender stuck to the opposite end of the bar, glancing nervously at Alastor every so often, checking that his glass wasn't empty.

Vox brightened and headed towards the bar. He slid into the seat next to Alastor's.

“So, what's your poison?”

Alastor raised his gaze slowly from his book and turned to Vox. He blinked, looking startled to see him. Vox smiled cheerfully.

“...You're either not as smart as I gave you credit for, or you have a death wish,” drawled Alastor.

“Perhaps I just like the sound of your voice,” said Vox with a wink as he tapped Alastor’s almost-empty glass. “What can I get you?”

Alastor assessed him for a long moment. “Brandy. Top shelf.”

“A man of taste,” hummed Vox before he threw a glance at the bartender. “Make that two.”

A few seconds later, two glasses of rich, honey-coloured liquid appeared in front of them. Vox brought his glass to his lips and Alastor watched him, seemingly intrigued by the sight of him *drinking* through his glass screen. Vox waited for the inevitable question.

“Is your entire body biomechanical or just your head?” Alastor asked.

Oh, that was new. That was *exciting*. Alastor already knew about biomechanics? This man was truly something special.

“My whole body is an engineer’s *and* a doctor’s worst nightmare,” replied Vox. “I can be infected with both the influenza virus and a common computer virus at the same time.” He swirled his drink around his glass. “Not that either of them can survive very long in me.”

“Hm,” said Alastor but there was a sparkle in his eye and Vox suppressed the urge to grin. Alastor was pleased to see him again.

“You know a lot about the subject?”

“No, but I once met a clockwork demon - another Overlord - and I learned a little about biomechanics as I tortured him, took him apart, cog by cog,” Alastor said and he didn’t look at Vox as he said it but Vox could feel that it was some sort of test; knew that Alastor was putting out feelers for his limits.

Vox wasn't so easily scared away. "Clocks are fragile," Vox commented. "Televisions though? They have stronger casing. You've got to try a little harder to *break* them."

Alastor's smile widened.

"So, what's the deal with you and shadows?" Vox asked, testing his luck. How much would Alastor tell him?

"Shadows are such mischievous creatures once you learn to play with them properly. And they are brilliant at hiding things," Alastor said airily and Vox didn't push him for details of his silhouette. The Radio Demon might back off if he pushed too hard, too fast.

"And the deer theme you have going?" Vox asked.

"Killed by a hunter," Alastor said with that ever-present smile, but his eyes seemed a little strained and his ears lowered half a centimetre. There was a story there - one Alastor wasn't ready to talk about. Vox would leave it for now, but one day he'd wheedle that story out of the Radio Demon.

Today, he would keep things light, make Alastor *warm* to him. He was good at that, at putting on a charming, friendly persona, at convincing others to *trust* him even if he didn't deserve it.

He stretched his arms out wide and grinned. "Take a wild guess at how I died."

Alastor eyed his face and was either too polite or thought the answer was too obvious to be true. "...Electrocution?"

"Wrong. Try again."

Alastor hesitated, eyes bright and amused. "Tell me you didn't get crushed to death by a picturebox?"

“Ding ding ding! We have a winner!” Vox said, playing a few game show sound effects and Alastor chuckled at his theatrics. Vox found himself smiling a little wider at the sincere sound. “And it wasn’t exactly an accident,” he snorted. “It was pushed from a third-story window. I looked up, didn’t have time to jump out of the way, and suddenly my skull was *atomised* and I woke up here because, apparently, I’m a bit of an asshole.”

Alastor leaned casually against the bar, quiet and smiling. Arrogance rolled off his frame and where some demons might have found the act irritating, Vox found himself drawn closer to the powerful Overlord, like a helpless moth to a raging inferno. He wanted a taste of that power, wanted to see what Alastor was *really* capable of.

If he wasn’t careful, he would grow addicted to Alastor’s attention - all that hidden power yet his focus was entirely on Vox. Wasn’t that a delicious, ego-boosting thought?

“What was your cardinal sin?” Alastor asked curiously.

Vox snorted and began counting his fingers. “Pride, greed, lust, envy, lies, theft, adultery - although that one technically wasn’t my fault.” Vox shrugged a shoulder. “Take your pick.”

Alastor drew a finger around the rim of his glass. “Murder? Rape? Pedophilia?”

Vox scowled and pulled a face. “I wasn’t *that* bad a scumbag.”

Alastor said nothing, merely brought the glass to his lips. Vox eyed him carefully. “What about you? How did you earn your place down here?”

“Murder,” Alastor said lightly. “But you already knew that.”

Most sinners knew that the fearsome Radio Demon had been a serial killer in his human life. Vox was no exception to this, but he wanted to know the gritty details. What other sins had he

committed? Why had he killed those people? How many lives had he taken? *How* had he taken them?

“Anything else? Any other sins?” Vox pressed and Alastor side-eyed him, remaining silent.

Vox returned his gaze to his drink. “Mommy and daddy dearest never paid me much attention - and the attention they gave me wasn’t exactly *good* - so I figured I’d become a movie star, adored by *millions*. As a teenager, I fell in with the wrong crowd. Did a lot of shit that guaranteed a first-class ticket here, then I tried to clean myself up, got into university off my own back, learned how to work a camera, take it apart and put it together again, and I got hired by a studio. Became someone I was *almost* proud of, but there was always that need for attention simmering below the surface - an itch I couldn’t quite scratch.”

Vox frowned, an old, familiar ache in his chest. He ignored it. “I got an opportunity to be in front of the camera instead of behind it. Started off as a small-time reporter and quickly transitioned into acting, for the money and fans. The fame got to my head. All the shitty things you hear famous stars doing? I’ve tried it all and more.” He attempted a grin but knew it had fallen flat when Alastor raised an eyebrow at him. He quickly looked away, scowling into his drink.

He thought he was past all this. All the *emotions* that came with his memories. He was an up-and-coming sinner with big ambitions and a few souls already under his belt - his smile wasn’t supposed to falter at memories of his human life. He wasn’t supposed to have *regrets*.

Weaknesses.

Expect nothing less from a pansy, his father would say if he were here. *A mind broken by an evil and perverted soul*.

Vox pursed his lips and swigged his drink.

Alastor watched him silently and Vox realised his own leg was bouncing. He stilled it and plastered on a fake smile and put a hand on Alastor’s shoulder to distract himself, to *ground* himself.

“What about you, Smiles? What’s your story?”

Static prickled Vox’s skin and a high-pitched frequency grew steadily louder, grating to his audio inputs. Alastor’s smile was sharp and deadly and his eyes flickered between red and black as his rage grew.

“Remove your hand before I remove it from your arm,” Alastor said calmly.

Vox recoiled his hand.

The static and accompanying whistle vanished and Alastor smiled amiably at Vox. “It’s rude to touch without asking.”

Vox stared at him for a moment before digging his fingers into his own knees. *Damn it, why was everyone always so repulsed by the thought of touching him?*

He scowled at his own childish thoughts. He was spiralling into his own head again. What he needed was a no-strings-attached, rough and dirty hook-up to get him back on track - preferably someone with a dick as a huge middle finger to his rotten parents.

Alastor was clearly off-limits, which was a shame because Vox would very much like to be put in his place by the powerful Radio Demon, but he was sure *someone* in this joint would go home with him and throw him around a little.

Alastor was watching him again, *studying* him.

“Apologies, my good man,” Vox said with a charming grin and a tip of his boxy head. “I meant no offence.”

Alastor hummed and took a sip of his brandy, but Vox didn't let the non-answer deter him.

"So, what exactly *is* the thing that forms out of your silhouette?"

A low chuckle. Alastor drained the rest of his glass and stood and Vox's shoulders slumped.

"A word of advice, Vox," drawled Alastor. "Stop fishing before you fall into the sea." He reached into the inside pocket of his coat and withdrew a few bills. Vox reached out to grab his wrist but stopped himself at the last moment, noting how narrowed Alastor's eyes were.

"I said I'd buy the round," Vox reminded quietly as he pulled out a card and flashed it at the bartender.

Alastor nodded and sauntered away, coat swaying and cane striking the floor like a slow metronome. *Elegant bastard*, thought Vox miserably as he paid for the drinks and glanced around the remaining patrons for anyone even *half* as graceful and mysterious as the Radio Demon.

Disappointed, he plucked up his near-empty drink and made a bee-line for the largest, roughest-looking demon in the room. He wanted to wake up tomorrow and see the evidence on his skin that someone had touched him.

Tonight, he wanted to be *used*.

Alastor hauled his latest victim into the bookshop, hidden under the cover of nightfall.

The other Overlord was unconscious, with a few broken bones, a nasty head injury, and various deep gashes littering his body courtesy of Alastor's feral silhouette.

Alastor hadn't escaped uninjured, but a couple of broken fingers would heal quickly with the power he held.

He grunted as his shadow tried to break free of its cage, desperate to sink its teeth into the unconscious Overlord. With a snarl, Alastor shoved it into its prison and locked the door. It screeched silently at him and clawed at his insides, and he grit his teeth as an ache blossomed in his stomach.

"Have you still not learned to control that shadow of yours, Alastor?"

Ears lowering, Alastor glowered at the floor - at the concussed sinner lying sprawled between two bookcases. "I'm working on it."

There was a breathy chuckle. "You need to treat it with a firmer hand. Violence is the only language it understands."

Alastor scowled, clenching his fists. He didn't really comprehend how his silhouette worked. He could contain it if he focused enough but he didn't know how to communicate with it. He didn't understand *what it was*.

The Voice said it was a part of him. That it felt what he did. That, with time, he could command it, *weaponise* it, use it to protect himself. Alastor wasn't convinced. He couldn't even trust it. If it was a part of him, why did it keep lashing out at him? Why did it keep defying his orders?

Why was it so damn aggressive?

"That Television Demon visited you today."

Alastor froze before forcing an indifferent smile. "Curiosity killed the cat, as they say."

“Exactly, but you didn’t kill him, did you? You could have brought *him* to me instead of this pathetic excuse for an Overlord. He gave you a second chance after you let him escape last time.”

Alastor bared his teeth. “I gave you his pain and fear. That’s what you need, isn’t it? Pain, fear, lust, shame, anguish, fury... You said I got to choose the emotion they feel. You said you feed off them all equally.”

“You didn’t bring him *here* though, did you?” The Voice said and the air grew colder as the lights flickered. “Why didn’t you lure him out of the bar today? Why pick a fight with someone else when he would have *willingly* gone wherever you led him?”

Alastor’s fingernails bit crescents into his palms.

“Do you *like* him?”

“No,” Alastor snapped at the ceiling before he looked away. The Voice chuckled again, like an icy wind between the leaves of a tree. The hairs at the back of Alastor’s neck stood on end.

“Liar.”

Alastor grimaced. “...He’s... different. Clever. *Perceptive*. You don’t get many sinners like that. He isn’t afraid of me and when he is, he pushes through it. He has... potential.”

“Are you lonely, little fawn?” The question was cruel. Mocking. “I thought you wanted to be feared?”

So had Alastor. After thirty years of being alone however, things got... boring. Depressing. There was always Rosie and she was such a darling woman, but she had seen the change in him when he’d received his new powers, frowned as he’d shaped himself into a ruthless

Overlord, and her gaze had grown a little wary when other Overlords began disappearing after fighting him. Their interactions were a fraction more stilted these days - a thread of mistrust obvious when she invited him for tea.

And the invitations were growing few and far between.

He missed having someone to talk to, but everyone fled at the sight of him. He could force one of his owned souls to chat to him but they would agree to anything he said, merely to keep him from hurting them - not that he would unless they forced his hand. There wasn't much sport in torturing someone who was already at your mercy. He was firm, but he wasn't *abusive*.

"He admires you."

Alastor's ear flicked but he otherwise said nothing.

"A little too much," purred The Voice. "I felt a wisp of lust from him today."

Alastor stiffened.

"He likes that you're powerful. It turns him on."

Alastor bit back a growl. Every time he had hopes for someone, they proved no better than the other degenerates that populated Hell.

"He'll find you again. He can't resist you."

Alastor closed his eyes, shoulders sagging in defeat. "I'll bring him to you."

“Good boy. Get some rest. We’ll speak again soon. I’ll call for you.”

Alastor turned towards the door and hesitated before he pushed through it. He glanced at the unconscious Overlord. “...What will you do with him?”

“Curiosity killed the cat, little fawn. Remember?”

He pressed his lips together. She never revealed what happened to the Overlords he brought her. Tonight was no different.

He left the bookshop.

Chapter End Notes

Warning for one homophobic slur.

Vox needs to learn when to keep his hands to himself it seems...

Chapter 4: Chasing The Hunter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Perusing the aisles of the shop, Vox lifted up various vinyls and inspected the new music that had filtered its way down to Hell from Earth's charts. There was always a couple of years delay in media arriving in Hell, so new music was never truly *new*, but Vox had plans to fix that once he became his own boss. He figured with the right tools, with the technology that he was working on, music and video could arrive in Hell mere days after its release on Earth.

He couldn't *wait* to start his own company. He had big plans. He just needed to put in a little work first.

There was a subtle change in air pressure, a soft *pop* of static that would have gone unnoticed by a sinner that wasn't intimately familiar with electricity and charge in the way that Vox was. Vox didn't outwardly react as he continued strolling up the aisles, but his gaze slid from shadow to shadow, looking for a distortion, a flicker, any sign of movement-

There.

Back wall. Near the easy-listening section. Vox smirked and casually made his way over, fingering through 45s at random as though searching for something in particular.

He neared the area he'd spotted the darkness shift. The entire store was dimly-lit - probably to create an intimate atmosphere to entice people to buy music, or perhaps the owner of the store merely liked the darkness for all that it could hide.

A thrill raced through Vox's spine. He thought he had blown his chances at seeing the Radio Demon again, but apparently not. Why was Alastor watching him this time?

He found himself turning his back to the shadow that had moved, pushing his luck, testing Alastor's intentions. He felt a little breathless as static popped quietly again. If the Radio Demon grabbed him now, would Vox fight back? Would there be any point? What would

Alastor do if he caught Vox? Vox's pulse quickened and he realised he wanted to find out. Was that weird?

Maybe Alastor was right. Maybe he was a bit of a masochist.

He couldn't help it. There was something bewitching about the Radio Demon. So many secrets. So much power. If Vox played his cards right, if he could get close to the untouchable Overlord, perhaps he could have an ally. Imagine the reputation boost that would bring him! The fear and respect. He might have a better time at gaining new souls for his chain, more power, and then he could quit his job and start his own company, perhaps with the Radio Demon at his side...

He was getting ahead of himself.

He flicked through records slowly, waiting for Alastor to clear his throat or tap his shoulder or *pounce*... but nothing happened.

When nothing continued to happen, Vox frowned. What was Alastor waiting for? Was he simply *observing*? Whatever for? The shop was empty save for the sinner at the till, and she wasn't paying attention to anything except her magazine. Vox was an easy target.

He paused his mindless searching when he laid eyes upon an Andrew Sisters single. A smile touched his lips and he pulled the record from its slot and placed it at the front of the stack, face forwards. He moved to the next batch of vinyls, allowing the hidden Alastor to see the sleeve of the record he had moved.

Near You

Still, Alastor didn't reveal himself so Vox decided to up his game. With a smirk, Vox continued perusing records and snorted at an Ink Spots single. Oh, that was too perfect. He plucked up the record and again, placed it at the front of the stack, then he turned a corner into the next aisle.

There was a chuckle from the shadow and Vox grinned.

“ *We Three. My Echo, My Shadow, And Me,* ” Alastor read as he stepped into the yellow light and brushed his fingers against the last record Vox had moved. He flicked his amused gaze to the Television Demon. “What gave me away?”

Vox attempted to keep a straight face as he lifted up another record for Alastor to see.

Silhouettes by The Rays.

Alastor’s eyes brightened with mirth. “You have a sharp eye.”

Vox winked and put the record back. “I think I’m just more attuned to your energy because it’s so familiar.”

Alastor cocked his head a little. “How so?”

Vox gathered a little energy and his antenna crackled before he dispersed the charge into the air. Alastor’s ears flicked and he glanced down at his arm curiously as the charge bounced off his skin.

“Static,” Vox supplied as Alastor flexed his fingers. “There’s a slight pressure change and a bit of a crackle when you appear. I suppose I’m more sensitive to it than other sinners.”

“Perhaps,” said Alastor slowly as he raked his gaze over Vox’s form, and *honestly*, he needed to stop looking at Vox like that. It was *indecent*. Vox had to fight to stop his fans from switching on. Oh, the things he could do to that angular body...

“Well, that certainly takes the fun out of sneaking up on you,” Alastor continued.

Vox grinned, leaning against the rack of vinyls. “Oh? And why are you trying to sneak up on me, Radio Demon?”

A deadly smirk swept across Alastor’s expression. “Perhaps I was looking for a light snack?”

“I might be a little crunchy, what with all the glass and metalwork,” commented Vox as he crossed his arms, an amused smile playing about his lips as he tried to rid his head of thoughts of other uses for Alastor’s mouth.

Alastor narrowed his eyes as he prowled towards Vox and Vox stood his ground, enjoying this strange game. This *challenge*.

“I have the teeth for it,” purred Alastor as his antlers began to elongate and *oh*, this was fun.

Vox’s antennae sparked as he allowed electricity to dance over his frame and Alastor’s smile widened as his pupils morphed into swinging radio dials. He continued to stalk towards Vox and when he was barely a foot away, Vox drew power from the building, making the lights flicker and dim.

Alastor’s gaze snapped up to the ceiling and he looked wary for a moment before his smile returned. “Is that... you?”

Vox hummed and Alastor’s gaze landed on him, eyes sparkling with delight despite their unusual appearance. “You’re just full of surprises,” murmured Alastor as he bared his teeth in a dangerous grin. “Most people would have already started running.”

Vox leaned further against the rack, enjoying the teasing powerplay. Would Alastor be this much of a tease in bed? Would he torture Vox with his words and hands and *teeth*? “Would you chase me? If I ran?”

“I would,” said Alastor lowly, gaze bright and intrigued. “Would you let me catch you?”

“I would,” Vox purred, heat curling in his belly. He hadn’t had this much chemistry with anyone for a long time. Hadn’t found anyone this *interesting* in, well, *ever*.

Alastor’s gaze was hungry. “I was hoping you’d give me a good chase.”

Vaguely, Vox sensed that Alastor was only half-joking. There seemed to be an underlying threat to his words and Vox realised that perhaps he had pushed a little too far at the bar last week. Still, the promise of a game scratched an itch he didn’t know he had and he found himself grinning wider at Alastor.

“Close your eyes and count to ten,” he whispered and Alastor raised an eyebrow before Vox suddenly zipped into the lights and raced through cables, appearing just outside the store front. He whistled to grab Alastor’s attention and waved cheekily, watching as the Radio Demon’s expression turned from startled to *thrilled*.

Alastor smirked and melted into the shadows and Vox realised that the Radio Demon had an advantage this dusky evening. He felt the telltale *pop* of static a few feet away from the halo of light the streetlamp cast around Vox, and he turned in time to see Alastor step into the light.

Excitement surged through Vox’s veins and he briefly wondered what would happen if Alastor caught him, before he vanished into the power grid and its mess of cables. He heard Alastor chuckle quietly and he made sure to throw off enough static charge as he sped through the grid to let Alastor know where he was. After all, if he was attuned to Alastor’s static, it made sense that Alastor was attuned to his, but there was lots of interference in the city, and Alastor would have a hard time tracking him at such high speeds, so it was only fair that Vox offered him some help.

Alastor chased him around Pentagram City, Vox appearing below a light or camera and waiting just long enough for Alastor to get close before he disappeared into the cables again. Each time, he would wait a little longer, let Alastor get a little closer, test his luck over and over until suddenly, Alastor caught him.

“Cheater,” laughed Vox as one of Alastor’s shadows wrapped around his middle and pinned him against the wall, being careful to protect his head from smacking against the brick.

Alastor smiled but his chest was heaving from the hunt and his eyes were bright with satisfaction. Vox found his own chest heaving as he sucked in oxygen and he swallowed, throat dry as Alastor advanced on him. In his enthusiasm, the air around Vox crackled and fritzed with energy, static skittering off Alastor’s skin in a pleasant and playful manner. Alastor responded *beautifully*, ramping up his own charge and letting it tickle and nip at Vox until the Television Demon’s fans increased to their highest setting.

“You’re enjoying this,” Alastor accused, but he looked *pleased*.

“So are you,” Vox pointed out with a smug grin.

Alastor hummed thoughtfully, twirling his cane in one hand. “Only because I won.”

“Perhaps I let you catch me.” Perhaps he’d let Alastor do more than catch him if he asked.

“Perhaps you did,” agreed Alastor. “But that makes you a fool.”

Alastor was *so close*. Vox licked his lips and realised that he wanted the Radio Demon to *touch* him. What would it feel like, to be touched by those long, clever fingers? Would they be gentle? Would they be demanding? Would Alastor hurt him like other sinners or would they trace his throat with feather light curiosity? What would they feel like wrapped around his cock? Would they be harsh enough to leave bruises, or would they be tender and slow? What would Alastor’s fingers feel like when they were wrapped around his neck?

What would his hand feel like slotted against Vox’s own? Would those fingers be gentle if they toyed with his antennae? Would they caress his face or crack his screen? What would his lips taste like?

Vox closed his eyes, steadying his thoughts. He sounded desperate and pathetic. This wasn't the time nor the place to let his touch-starved body get the better of him. Save it for the bedroom.

A soft gasp left his lips when Alastor's cane slid gently beneath his screen, tilting his head up until he met the Radio Demon's curious gaze. It was a good thing that Alastor's shadow was holding him up; his knees were *weak*.

"You're a strange one," Alastor murmured, a small frown pinching his expression. "Why aren't you afraid of me?"

Vox wasn't sure. Logically, he should be. Alastor had tried to kill him and he had threatened him a few times now, but the longer Vox spent with Alastor, the more his fear shrivelled and faded.

"I like you," Vox said, shrugging.

Alastor scowled and recalled his shadow. Suddenly, he plastered on a wide smile and Vox found himself frowning, noting how the playful atmosphere between them had suddenly dissipated, to be replaced by something colder, something *sharper*.

"I'd like to show you something," Alastor said. "A place that is rather... special to me."

There was something wrong. Something *sinister* about the way he said those words, but Vox was helpless to resist. He *wanted* to spend more time with Alastor and was apparently willing to go wherever the Radio Demon led him, which was likely a very stupid thing to do. Still, he nodded eagerly, desperate for any scraps of attention the powerful Overlord would throw at him.

Alastor's gaze darkened but his smile remained as he whirled on his heel and gestured for Vox to follow.

Their pace was leisurely as they wandered through dark streets, but Vox was under no illusion that wherever Alastor was taking him could be a trap - one he might not be able to talk his way out of.

So, he should probably start talking *now*.

“Listen, about last week,” Vox said, watching one of Alastor’s ears swivel towards him even if the demon himself didn’t turn his head. “I shouldn’t have fished. I’m just... curious, I suppose. The rumours don’t do you justice.”

Alastor raised an elegant eyebrow. “What exactly were you hoping for?”

Vox thrust his hands into his pockets. “I wasn’t *hoping* for anything. I was pleasantly surprised to find you so...” He trailed off, searching for the right word.

“Patient?” Alastor asked drily, side-eying Vox.

“Approachable.”

Alastor stopped and turned to Vox with raised eyebrows. “I beg your pardon?”

Vox shrugged, hands buried in his pockets still. “I find you approachable. You’re dangerous, sure. Everyone knows how powerful you are. You’re aloof and mysterious and maybe a little bit crazy... but no one talks about your wicked sense of humour. No one talks about how smart you are, about how sharp that silver tongue of yours is. No one talks about how charming you are, how good a listener you are.”

Alastor stared at him in silence, looking more and more bewildered by the second. Vox grinned.

“You pretend to be this vicious, blood-thirsty monster - or at least, that’s how you want everyone to see you - but when you slammed me against that wall back there, your shadow protected my head so my screen wouldn’t break. Back in that alley a couple of weeks ago, you told that feral silhouette of yours not to hurt me, and when it did, you immediately tried to drag it off me. There’s more to you than meets the eye. You’re *complicated* but you aren’t as cruel as the rumours make out.”

Alastor remained quiet and his smile was thin-lipped, ears lowering a fraction as he assessed Vox. Wordlessly, he restarted their journey, slower this time, *hesitant*. Vox watched his emotions play across his twitching ears. Did Alastor realise how expressive they were? Did he know that his smile hid nothing when his ears were at work?

“I think you’re covering for someone, or something,” said Vox lightly. “I think you act ruthless because you have to.”

They came to a halt in front of an empty bookshop and Alastor had yet to speak as he wrapped his fingers around the door handle. His ears lay flat and his frown was conflicted.

Vox took a moment to eye the bookshop. There didn’t seem to be anything special about it other than the fact that it was still unlocked this late. There were no staff members inside and no lights on. Why had Alastor brought him here?

“Don’t assume to know me, Vox,” Alastor said quietly. “I’m not the man you seem to think I am.” He pressed down on the handle.

Vox frowned, tilting his head slightly when he realised that Alastor wouldn’t look at him. “I think you *are* that man, you just don’t believe it.”

Again, Alastor hesitated, brows pinching closer together. Vox took a long look at him and found his own shoulders slumping with a strange sort of sympathy.

“It must be so *lonely* being you.”

Alastor's fingers slid away from the handle and Vox felt his heart rate increase. Why did it feel like Alastor had just made a monumental decision?

"You should leave," Alastor muttered as he turned his back on Vox. "Don't come looking for me again." He started down the street and Vox scowled and trotted after him.

"I'm not done with you yet," Vox said and Alastor eyed him sharply.

"Walk away, Vox. Before I change my mind."

Vox pulled a face. "What was in that bookshop?"

"I said *walk away*," Alastor growled. "Don't test my patience."

"I'm right, aren't I? You're lonely. This reputation of yours has isolated you. No one ever looks past it, do they?"

"Perhaps they're wise to keep away," Alastor said through gritted teeth. "You should follow their example."

"Why? You worried I might get *hurt*?" Vox asked with a triumphant smirk.

Alastor flashed him a dangerous grin. "You're playing a risky game, Vox. I'm not as nice as you think I am. I *bite*."

"So do I," purred Vox. "Teach me the rules of this *game*. You might enjoy playing with a partner."

Alastor shot him an exasperated look. "Perhaps I severely overestimated your intelligence."

Vox grinned, wide and confident as he realised that *he* had the advantage. “You *like* me,” he pointed out.

Alastor’s ears flattened, smile growing into something more akin to a snarl. “Careful, Television Demon...”

Vox slid in front of Alastor, excitement blossoming in his chest as he blocked the Radio Demon’s path. Alastor bristled at his arrogance. “Take me under your wing,” Vox said giddily.

“*Excuse me?*”

“Take me under your wing,” Vox insisted. “Teach me the ropes! Show me how to get started with my own company and help me get it off the ground. In return, I’ll help you with your little problem. I’ll help you with whatever is going on with that bookshop-”

Vox grunted as Alastor suddenly grabbed his sweater and slammed him against the nearest shop with a snarl. “You’re getting a little too familiar for my liking. I’m not your friend.”

“I’m not looking for a *friend*,” Vox sneered. “I’m looking for someone to help me gain power.” He lifted his chin defiantly. “I told you; I have big plans down here. If you help me, I’ll help you.”

Alastor laughed, cold and condescending. “I don’t need you, little picturebox.”

“And I don’t *need* you,” Vox said, just as haughtily. “I’ll get what I want whether you help or not, but won’t it be simpler for us both if we ally ourselves?”

A vicious smile stretched across Alastor’s face and he pulled away from Vox, looking over him in disdain. “Goodnight, Vox,” he growled as he turned away.

“I’ll tell everyone what I saw,” Vox said quickly before he could really think it through. “I’ll do it on live television. I’ll tell everyone how you can’t control your shadow, how it attacked you. I’ll tell everyone that you’re being *forced* to target Overlords. I’ll tell everyone that you’re not the ruthless, blood-thirsty monster they think you are.”

For a moment, Alastor said nothing and Vox’s pulse raised with anticipation. Then, Alastor glanced at Vox over his shoulder.

“Run.”

Vox narrowed his eyes. “Make me.”

Alastor *lunged*.

He gripped Vox by the front of his sweater with a snarl, shoving him hard against the wall as his shadows slithered around Vox’s legs and waist and neck, and before they could snake around his wrists, Vox wrapped his arms around Alastor and dragged him against his body, sending a low continuous voltage through him as a warning.

Alastor grit his teeth, eyes a little wild as he tried to break free of Vox’s grip, but Vox held tighter, keeping up the charge.

“Let me go,” Alastor spat, pushing at Vox’s chest and the shadows eased their hold slightly, giving Vox the advantage. He flipped their positions, pinning the wide-eyed Alastor against the wall as he continued to pump a mild electric current through Alastor’s body.

“Say *yes* and I’ll let you go,” purred Vox, enjoying the powerplay. It felt good facing off against Alastor, watching the irresistible Radio Demon lose his composure and fight with his fists as well as his shadows. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say that Alastor was *flirting* with him-

A shadow wrapped far too tightly around his throat and he gagged, panic filling his chest as he was dragged forwards and his screen was smashed into the brick wall once, twice, three times before he was hurled onto the floor.

He placed a hand over the jagged cracks in his screen and didn't have long to recover before shadows gripped his wrists and ankles and *pulled*, overstretching his limbs to the point of pain, whilst simultaneously keeping him pinned to the ground.

He hissed in agony and lifted his gaze to Alastor, only to find the Radio Demon pressed against the wall like a defensive animal, ears pinned back to his skull and teeth bared in a snarl as his antlers elongated and the dials in his eyes swung erratically. His fingers were curled into the wall behind, knuckles white and chest heaving.

Vox felt breathless, and not in a *good* way. Alastor looked *afraid*. Genuinely afraid, like he was acting on instinct - fighting for his life instead of the teasing powerplay Vox had thought was happening. He thought Alastor was *challenging* him, *seducing* him, but now Vox realised that wasn't the case. Something had changed and he hadn't noticed.

He swallowed. Alastor might *actually* kill him.

There was a flicker of shock behind Alastor's expression before fear filtered into his gaze and Vox watched Alastor's inner turmoil play out as he lay still on the floor. Alastor shut his eyes, growling softly as his brow creased with concentration and his fingers curled further into the wall. He sucked in a sharp breath.

"No," he muttered, voice low. "You're not coming out."

Vox forced himself to relax, forced himself to be submissive, to prove that he wasn't a threat. Even though the act went against every instinct he had, he didn't want Alastor to kill him and he certainly didn't want Alastor's feral silhouette to make an appearance.

Alastor struggled. Static crackled around them, stinging Vox's skin with its intensity. The shadows around Vox's limbs stopped pulling but they didn't release him. Vox sat up slowly, freezing when Alastor threw him a sharp look. He held his hands up placatingly.

“I thought you were enjoying the fight,” Vox admitted. “I thought this was some sort of *foreplay*... I wasn’t paying attention.”

Alastor’s eyes widened a little before he squeezed them shut again and grit his teeth harder. “No!” he snapped and Vox stiffened as the silhouette at Alastor’s feet flickered and twitched before growing still once more.

“I’m sorry,” Vox said, wondering what had changed. Wondering *why* Alastor had gone from teasing to panicked. He realised he didn’t like seeing the Radio Demon like this, didn’t like watching him press himself against the wall like a frightened animal . Alastor was supposed to be Hell’s apex predator and Vox had somehow reduced him to *prey*.

He should be *thrilled*. He should feel smug and powerful. Instead, he felt... Guilty. Dirty.

He watched Alastor struggle to control the monster inside him. Alastor wasn’t even fighting *him* anymore; he was fighting whatever was trying to crawl out of him.

There was no pleasure or glory in this.

Vox stood slowly and Alastor threw him a fearful look before he stiffened as he realised he’d lost concentration for a fraction of a second. His silhouette broke free of whatever hold he had on it and Vox felt genuine terror grip his chest as the creature launched itself at him and sent him crashing into the ground once more.

It tore at his flesh with an expression of pure fury and it screeched silently before gripping the broken glass of Vox’s screen and *ripping it out of his face*.

Vox howled and threw his arms over his head to protect himself as he kicked out uselessly at the creature that had no physical form. His body burned as his skin was slashed open and he built a charge, letting it dance over his frame in bright blue bolts of electricity.

His defensive mechanism seemed to enrage the shadow further as it was forced to leap off him, holding its claws to its chest, seemingly hurt by the electricity - or perhaps the light from it...? Vox didn't have time to dwell on it before the shadow was on him again, trying to tear his antennae from his head as it bit down on his shoulder. He gathered another charge, knowing he wouldn't be able to keep this level of energy up for long, but the shadow caught on quickly and sunk its claws deep into his stomach - deep enough that Vox thought the beast was trying to eviscerate him.

He threw Alastor a panicked look.

"Help me," he begged as Alastor stared in stunned horror. Alastor met his gaze and there was a flicker of uncertainty there, making Vox swallow. "Please," he whimpered. Was Alastor really going to let him die? Had Vox misjudged the Radio Demon so drastically? Was Alastor truly as cold and cruel as the rumours made him out to be?

Was Vox the only one who had felt the chemistry between them? The *potential*?

He realised he was afraid. It had been a long time since he had been afraid of anything. Confidence and charisma drove every decision he made and he had thought death wouldn't faze him - especially when sinners could regenerate after being killed. But lots of Overlords had gone missing after picking a fight with Alastor, never to be seen again. Was this why? Was it the silhouette that killed them permanently?

Vox didn't want to die.

His mechanical brain didn't recognise his own intestine being pulled out of the gaping wound in his stomach. The silhouette grinned gleefully as it held up the section of duodenum like a trophy.

Vox felt his body lock up with shock, and white hot fear and agony settled into icy numbness as he blinked slowly at the blood dripping from his intestine onto what remained intact of his abdomen.

He felt *exhausted*.

Everything seemed to unfold in slow motion after that, or perhaps as though he was watching the events through water, being dragged deeper and deeper into a cold, dark, unforgiving sea.

Alastor towered over the grinning silhouette in his most grotesque form and the shadow noticed too late as Alastor flexed his spindly fingers and a tear opened up in the silhouette's abdomen - matching Vox's. The silhouette screamed wordlessly and whirled around to lash out at Alastor, but Alastor's smile widened and another tear opened up in the silhouette's chest. It scrambled away from Alastor, frightened and he said something to it that Vox couldn't quite focus on because of the ringing sound at the back of his head.

The silhouette melted into Alastor and Alastor stared down at Vox for a long moment, hesitating. Vox blinked and suddenly, a smaller, more familiar Alastor was frowning at him as he knelt at his side and placed surprisingly gentle hands on Vox's abdomen.

He pushed Vox's intestine back inside him and a comforting warmth spread through Vox as Alastor muttered something under his breath. It felt like being wrapped in a thick blanket and Vox realised he was being dragged out of that icy sea and hauled ashore. The ringing faded and the numbness dissipated and the agony dissolved as the warmth seeped into his bones like sweet honey.

Vox lifted his head enough to see the wound on his abdomen knitting itself together. He blinked and stared up at Alastor, stunned. Few demons learned healing magic. Hell was all about murder and violence and gore - sinners tended to have more enemies than friends so there was little need to learn how to heal. If Alastor was so vicious and cruel, why could he *heal*?

There were strange green symbols lighting the ground around Alastor - a language Vox didn't understand - and at the corners of his mouth were emerald sutures, seemingly holding his smile in place.

Vox frowned. Were they *actually* holding his smile in place?

Alastor removed his hands from Vox's abdomen and the symbols faded along with the stitches. He didn't meet Vox's gaze as he stood.

“Next time, I’ll let it kill you,” Alastor said quietly before turning on his heel and stalking away, leaving Vox sprawled on the floor.

He turned to Alastor, watching him disappear into the shadows.

He pressed his lips into a thin line. He should heed the warning. He should leave Alastor alone. If he had any shred of self-preservation, he wouldn’t go searching for the Radio Demon ever again.

He touched his screen with gentle fingers once he noticed his vision was no longer distorted. Not one crack. In fact, aside from his ruined clothes, there wasn’t a single trace of evidence that they had even fought. Alastor had healed every scratch.

Vox stood, drumming his fingers against his thigh. He should walk away.

He *should*.

He glanced down the street at the bookshop.

He licked his lips. If Alastor didn’t like him, why heal him? Why change his mind about taking him into that shop? Why let him live after Vox had threatened to blackmail him?

So many mysteries. Vox couldn’t *possibly* walk away now.

He straightened his bloodied sweater. Alastor said he enjoyed a chase. Vox wondered if he enjoyed *being* chased. He smirked.

Let the hunt begin.

Chapter End Notes

Vox might have bitten off more than he can chew... ;)

Chapter 5: Dancing With Devils

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Despite manipulating shadows so easily, Alastor found no comfort in the darkness. His memories hadn't allowed him to find comfort in much these past years.

Still, Hell was no place for vulnerability, so Alastor strolled through the dark park with an air of indifference, ears flicking at the various rustling sounds and grunts and whimpers. He could feel eyes on him, sinners licking their lips and flexing their fingers as they hid behind trees and shrubs, using shadows to mask their figures. They wanted a taste of his blood, to hear his screams as they put him through agony. They wanted to *touch* him, to feel him writhe beneath them as he begged for them to stop. They wanted to pounce upon him, to drain his power, to *kill* him.

None of them were stupid enough to step out of the shadows. He may look like prey with his big, fluffy ears and small antlers, but his teeth were sharp and his claws lethal.

A wolf in sheep's clothing.

It was everything The Voice had promised him. And yet...

He curled his fingers tighter around his cane. And yet the memories still plagued him, still haunted his nightmares, made his skin crawl, made him shoot upright in the middle of the night, panting and sweating, gripping the sheets and wrestling with a silhouette he didn't understand.

His smile was thin-lipped. He couldn't even stand people brushing his fingers when they handed him a *drink*. It was why he constantly wore gloves - why he wouldn't bare any skin below the collar.

People thought he was being stylish, vain even, and he had no interest in correcting them.

He rolled his shoulder uncomfortably. The Voice had been... displeased at him letting Vox escape and he had been punished for it. Parts of him still ached despite his attempts at healing himself. The majority of the damage was fixed but it seemed that muscles remembered being thrown into walls and shelves multiple times, even if the bruises had faded.

There was someone following him. Hunting him. They had been stalking him for the past three minutes and they clearly thought he hadn't noticed. *Idiot.*

There was a soft pop of static and Alastor frowned. *Surely he wasn't that stupid...?*

He whirled around, teeth bared in an eerie grin and shadows rearing behind him. Vox was *right there*, smirking arrogantly a mere foot away as his skin danced with electricity.

"You're obnoxiously persistent," Alastor said with false sweetness.

Vox chuckled, gentle and frustrating. "You've let me escape twice now." He grinned haughtily. "You *like* me."

"Perhaps you aren't worth the effort of killing," Alastor said, matching Vox's tone. The *audacity* of this idiotic picturebox...

Amusement sparkled in Vox's gaze before his expression softened. "Thank you for saving me."

Alastor stiffened, gaze flitting between the trees, to the shadows and the eyes and ears within them. The rustling of the leaves muffled the curious, devious whispers.

"It was hardly intentional," Alastor growled before he spun on his heel and headed towards the park's exit. His ears lowered in annoyance when Vox trotted after him with that self-satisfied smirk.

“Sure,” he drawled. “Because every powerful, ruthless Overlord accidentally learns magic that can-”

Alastor slapped a hand over his mouth with a sharp, warning look. He glanced briefly at the dark corners of the park and Vox’s shoulders slumped, eyes widening as he realised his mistake. Alastor removed his hand slowly.

“I’m going to give you one last chance to walk away unscathed,” Alastor said quietly before he turned and left the park.

Predictably, Vox matched his pace.

“I still think we can help each other.”

“I don’t need you,” Alastor grumbled, jolting when Vox suddenly caught his wrist and whirled him around. Immediately, Alastor could feel his silhouette clawing at the bars of its prison, his other shadows writhing and flailing wildly as he grit his teeth and glowered at Vox.

Static crackled between them and Vox’s eyes drifted slowly to where he had gripped Alastor’s wrist, before he caught the Radio Demon’s gaze again. His eyes widened in surprise and he released Alastor’s wrist.

The shadows settled, as did Alastor’s shallow breaths.

Vox took a step back, giving Alastor space. “...You don’t like being touched,” Vox said quietly.

Alastor narrowed his eyes, a dangerous grin on his lips. “It’s rude to touch without asking permission,” he reminded.

Vox shook his head, a frown pinching his brows. “It’s more than that. You... tense up.”

Alastor cocked his head so sharply that it cracked. Vox startled.

“What are you insinuating?” Alastor asked with a pleasant smile.

Vox hesitated, considering the question carefully. Eventually, he shrugged. “Nothing. Just an observation.”

Alastor stared at him for a long moment before baring his teeth in an annoyed grin. “Kindly *observe* someone else.” He turned around again and marched away, barely suppressing a sigh when Vox appeared beside him, hands buried in his pockets.

“Whatever you’re looking for, you won’t find it in me,” Alastor said, remembering The Voice’s words from a couple of days previous but not wanting to sound too presumptuous, too *vulgar*.

Vox shot him a strange look before shaking his head. “I’m not looking for anything. I just think you and I would work well together. I think if you really wanted to kill me, I’d already be dead, and I think secretly, you like being chased for once instead of chasing everyone else.”

A sigh escaped Alastor’s lips and he came to a halt as he swivelled to face the Television Demon. He raked his gaze over Vox’s form, assessing him, trying to convince himself that none of that was true, and Vox straightened to his full height as he frowned.

“I’m curious, alright?” Vox admitted. “You’re not what I thought you’d be. You’re not the monster the rumours make you out to be.” He tilted his head. “Would it really be so bad to have a partner in crime?”

“Partners require trust,” Alastor said. “And this is Hell. Trust is sparse around these parts.”

“An ally, then,” Vox tried and Alastor had to admire his determination. He could feel his own resolve crumbling.

“Why should I help you become my biggest competition?” Alastor asked.

“Because I’d owe you,” Vox replied. “I’d be in your debt and you could call upon me for any favour of your choosing.”

Interest curled in Alastor’s gut. Now *there* was a deal... He smiled slyly, leaning against his cane.

“Oh? *Any* favour?”

Vox nodded firmly. *Stupid, naive, little picturebox.*

“Alright then,” Alastor agreed. “Give me a day or so to draft up a contract-”

Vox chuckled and held his hand out. “I’m not signing a contract with an Overlord. A handshake will have to do.”

Hm... Perhaps not that naive.

Alastor eyed his outstretched hand. “And how do I know you’ll stick to your end of the deal once I’ve helped you get what you want?”

“I always keep my promises,” said Vox before he smiled. “Trust me.”

Alastor hesitated. There were a hundred different ways this could go wrong - a hundred ways for Vox to stab him in the back.

Still, Vox had proved that he wasn't easily scared away, wasn't so easily broken. And he was observant. Perceptive. He wasn't vicious or violent, but he was ambitious and clever...

Alastor grasped his hand with a smirk. "Impress me."

Vox was correct - he and Alastor worked *beautifully* together.

Like puzzle pieces slotting in place, Alastor and Vox's skills complemented each other; one a master at audio, the other a master at visual, and the two of them coming together to create some *killer* shows.

Vox took to Alastor's radio equipment like a duck to water - learning the basics of broadcasting quickly and efficiently before looking into getting his hands on some video equipment. He helped Alastor with fresh content for his radio show and in return, Alastor shared a few tips with Vox when purchasing equipment to ensure that he didn't get ripped off. He even helped him to hire reputable staff members, ensuring they wouldn't turn on Vox when he had his back turned.

Vox *enjoyed* working with Alastor - so much so that when he finally had everything he needed to start producing small-scale television shows, a small pit developed in his stomach at the idea of Alastor slinking back to his radio tower alone, having finished his end of their deal.

In the grand scheme of things, seven months wasn't an awfully long time to work with someone, but Vox didn't want to lose what he had with the Radio Demon. They had great chemistry and similar ambition and he felt *valued* when he was with Alastor - like his opinions and ideas mattered. He felt listened to. He wasn't ready to give all of that up.

Which is why he was *ecstatic* when Alastor started popping by the television station, bringing him lunch or coffee, or lurking in the shadows and chatting to him during breaks.

When he wasn't working, Vox found himself visiting Alastor's radio tower, relishing the relaxed atmosphere and good music and sharing dinner with Alastor during his evening shows. Alastor invited him on air sometimes to say a few words or join in on a segment and Vox tried to coax Alastor onto his own shows occasionally, but Alastor would merely smile and say his face was 'made for radio'. Still, Vox would keep trying, his methods growing more creative, and it seemed to amuse Alastor greatly.

A little over a year after their original deal, when Vox's power was on the rise and the number of souls on his chain was increasing, Vox felt the first threads of something he hadn't experienced since he was alive.

It wasn't often that their broadcasts clashed since they were careful not to steal one another's audience, but a time error in an email had made it so Vox's last show had to be pushed an hour later, to the start of Alastor's evening broadcast. The Radio Demon was as understanding and graceful as ever and Vox had promised to plug Alastor's show at the end of his in the hopes that all of his viewers would switch their radios on.

Towards the end of Vox's talk show, he opened up the call lines, allowing a select few viewers to share their opinions on the day's topics. It was a fifteen-minute segment but lots of sinners liked to call in and share their views, and Vox could cut off the opinions that weren't relevant or the freaks that called in merely to tell Hell about their sick fetishes or declare war upon their enemies.

Today, the subject was 'Deals Gone Wrong' and the lines were on fire. Vox was surprised however, at the familiar tone of the last caller.

"Good evening," Vox said with a charming smile. "What's your name, where are you calling from, and what was the deal that went wrong?"

"Good evening, Mr. Television Demon," drawled an amused voice and Vox perked up, a smile lighting his face. "The name's Alastor and I'm calling from my radio tower at the start

of my evening show.”

Vox chuckled, settling comfortably into his chair. “It’s a pleasure to hear from you... Alastor, was it?”

“It was,” hummed Alastor. “I take it you haven’t heard of me?”

Vox shook his head, making a show of thinking hard. “Afraid not, my good sir. You said you had a deal that went wrong?”

“Indeed,” Alastor continued lightly and Vox could picture the amusement dancing in his eyes as he settled into his leather swivel chair and spoke into the microphone atop his cane. “You see, around a year ago, I met a very determined, very *persistent* young man who hadn’t been in Hell all that long. He had a head full of dreams and a scheming tongue and he proposed a deal that tricked me into helping him start his journey to becoming the owner of his own television station, making him my biggest competition.”

“Sounds like you got the short end of the stick in that particular deal,” Vox commented, grinning.

“Oh, absolutely,” agreed Alastor. “Now he’s started stealing my audience and I feel *betrayed*.”

Vox chuckled warmly. “Sorry, Al. Two minutes to go and I promise you can have them back.”

“Lovely.”

“You know what this shows though, right?” Vox couldn’t help but tease. “If your audience is with me, I’d say that proves, once and for all, that television is superior to radio.”

A running joke between them. Neither of them took it seriously, but they were constantly finding ways to one-up each other when it came to their chosen media form - a comment here or there, a fake argument over dinner, a small opinion segment about the topic on their respective shows... It was harmless fun. They enjoyed ribbing each other.

As usual, Alastor scoffed. "All it proves is the public enjoys trashy entertainment during the day, but likes to wind down in the evenings to something with a little more *quality*."

Vox bit back a laugh and rolled his eyes for the cameras before winking at them.

"Don't roll your eyes at me," said Alastor with mock indignation. "It isn't very professional. I taught you better than that."

Vox startled and amusement tugged at his lips when he realised that Alastor must be watching him *during his own radio show*. He shook his head fondly.

"And with that, folks, I suppose I'd better bid you goodnight. If you'd like a bit of cheap entertainment to round your evening off, switch your radios on and tune in to 66.6 FM to hear our delusional caller fumble his way through a few hours of music, interviews, and gossip."

There was a snort over the line.

"Thank you for trusting us with your afternoon entertainment," Vox signed off as usual before the broadcast ended.

Feeling light-hearted, Vox tidied his paperwork away and set off early, leaving his few employees to lock up. He picked up some takeout and headed towards the familiar radio tower, smiling at security when they allowed him through without pausing.

He trotted up to the broadcasting room and slipped inside quietly, waiting for Alastor to play some music before he took the empty seat beside Alastor's and handed him his dinner.

Vox glanced at the mixing board, ensuring the microphones weren't live. He grinned at Alastor.

“Thought you'd try to sabotage me, hm?” he teased.

Alastor's gaze sparkled with mirth. “You've been *begging* me to appear on your picture show. I thought I'd finally throw you a bone.”

Vox scoffed. “I haven't been *begging*.” Maybe a little. He wanted to be the first television station to get an interview with the elusive Alastor. He tried to convince himself it was for the ratings, but the more he thought about it, the more he wondered if he just wanted the opportunity to show off in front of Alastor, to impress him with all he had achieved.

To make him proud.

They ate dinner together and chatted in between interruptions from Alastor addressing his audience. Vox watched him with a fond smile, enjoying his smooth voice and the gentle tones he reserved for evening broadcasts. Despite owning a television station, Vox felt at home here in Alastor's tower, beside the Radio Demon as his friend worked the microphone and mixing board with practised ease. He knew Alastor's routine so well now that he found himself pressing buttons and altering sliders before the Radio Demon himself could reach them.

Some Overlords might have found his interferences jarring or overconfident, but Alastor merely smiled appreciatively and let him continue, trusting Vox entirely.

Vox grinned to himself at how easy it was for them to work together, despite them technically being in competition. He was still amazed at how supportive Alastor had been this past year, how he had nurtured Vox's ambitions and helped them grow into reality. Better than that, Alastor had *stayed*.

No one ever stayed. Vox's parents had never stuck around when he was alive and when he had found them in his first month in Hell, unsure where to go or what to do, they had

slammed the door in his face. His friends in his teenage years had bailed on him the moment the cops showed up, leaving him to take the heat for all the drugs they were selling, and his university friends had turned their backs on him the moment they found out he had a criminal record.

However, despite completing his end of the deal, Alastor had stayed by Vox's side. He didn't drop Vox the first chance he got and their friendship wasn't one-sided in any way. Alastor *liked* him.

And Vox liked Alastor. Genuine friends were hard to find in Hell, which made his trusting relationship with Alastor that much sweeter, that much more *special*.

He flicked his gaze to the Radio Demon, expression warm as Alastor finished his short interview with an up-and-coming artist. He looked so *comfortable* when he was on air. Relaxed. His shoulders were loose and his ears flopped forwards ever-so-slightly and his constant smile reached his eyes, meaning - as Vox had come to learn - that it was sincere. Alastor was at his happiest when he was on air and Vox was honoured that he got to see *this* Alastor. This soft, easygoing side.

Alastor laughed quietly at a silly quip and Vox was suddenly struck by how beautiful he was.

His heart thumped harder in his chest and he felt breathless as Alastor met his gaze from the corner of his eye, smiling as though they were sharing a secret. Vox's lips tugged into a grin and Alastor winked at him, his expression growing that little bit brighter at Vox's reaction.

He turned his attention back to his microphone and Vox's chest felt warm and fluttery. He let out a subtle breath.

Shit.

Not good.

Vox wasn't *allowed* to have those soft, gentle feelings for Alastor. Tender emotions had no place in Hell. Lust was fine - he had been quite happy admiring Alastor's narrow hips and slim body and sharp smile from afar. He had been content to daydream about Alastor's excessive flexibility and wicked tongue. He had even amused himself over whether or not Alastor had a fluffy tail above that pert, tight ass.

But those butterflies beating their wings against Vox's chest were *dangerous*. Alastor couldn't be touched - literally - and lust was easier to control than the butterflies. Vox was all too familiar with where the butterflies could lead him and once he headed down that path, there was no coming back.

Feelings like that could break a friendship and Vox couldn't allow that to happen.

Why now? A year later? And why, of all people, did it have to be *Alastor*? The one person he definitely couldn't have - the one person who had zero interest in romance or lust or anything beyond friendship with *anybody*.

Vox closed his eyes in defeat. He didn't want to stop seeing Alastor but how could he prevent his body from reacting to him? How could he convince his hopeless heart that Alastor was off-limits?

He almost laughed in disbelief as a romantic waltz lilted over the speakers. The universe was clearly testing him, laughing at his expense.

He opened his eyes and found Alastor smiling fondly at him, and the expression did nothing to slow his pulse. Alastor stretched a hand out to him and Vox's breath hitched as he realised the Radio Demon was asking him to dance. He took Alastor's hand gingerly, trying to ignore the heat racing through his skin from the contact.

This was important. Alastor struggled with touch, so dancing with a partner was something he avoided. Vox wouldn't allow his own selfish feelings to ruin the moment, especially when Alastor was putting so much faith in him. Vox didn't know why Alastor found touch so unbearable, but after a few months of narrow-eyed looks and firm reproaches, Vox had stopped asking questions - and now he refused to ask out of respect for Alastor's privacy.

Alastor pulled him out of his seat and guided Vox's hands to the proper following positions. Vox had been a keen dancer in his earlier years - practising in the shadows where his parents couldn't judge him - and he could lead or follow. Now, he was quite happy for Alastor to lead the pace, surprised that the Radio Demon was dancing with him at all.

The piece began slowly, seeming to take a while to warm up, but soon Alastor was swinging him around the room with ease and all Vox could think about was the feeling of Alastor's hand in his, the weight of long fingers against his back, and the feeling of Alastor's cotton shirt beneath his left hand.

The music grew more intense, more urgent and Vox could barely breathe when Alastor pressed a little closer, their stomachs brushing as they spun and glided across the floor, albeit a little stiltedly.

He could feel the tension in Alastor's shoulders, the loose grip on Vox's hand, the *discomfort* he was trying to suppress because, for some reason, Alastor *wanted* to dance with Vox. He wanted to push through whatever reservations he usually had and of course, he had chosen *now* to do it - right in the middle of Vox's internal crisis.

No matter. Vox could hide his own misplaced feelings. Right now, Alastor was more important. If he could find a way to relax the Radio Demon, to reassure him...

"You've done this before," Vox said quietly, unwilling to shatter the intimate atmosphere that had settled between them.

"A long time ago," Alastor agreed, voice equally as soft.

"In life?" Vox asked curiously and Alastor nodded.

"With the girl I was going to marry."

Vox blinked, surprised and Alastor's gaze sparkled with mischief. "Scandalous, I know."

“What happened?” Vox asked, immediately regretting it when hurt flashed behind Alastor’s eyes before it vanished just as quickly.

“She broke things off.”

Vox frowned, squeezing Alastor’s shoulder ever-so-gently. “That was foolish of her.”

Alastor gave him an odd look and Vox wondered if that had been the wrong thing to say. Alastor had a habit of recoiling at even the slightest hint of tender emotion, although he shut down completely at any attempts at flirting. He claimed to have no interest in that sort of thing, but obviously there had been a time in his human life when that wasn’t the case.

Alastor’s hand slid a little lower until it came to rest on the small of Vox’s back and Vox’s throat dried up.

“I hate waltzes,” Alastor commented, which was a rather odd thing to say after inviting Vox to waltz.

Vox raised an eyebrow and Alastor smirked at him. “This piece - *La Valse*, composed by Maurice Ravel - is the piece that marked the death of the waltz. Its final phrase has a four-step bar, ruining any and all attempts at waltzing to it. It’s notoriously difficult to play and is a fitting, violent end to a wretched era of dancing.”

Vox found himself grinning as he squeezed Alastor’s hand affectionately before he could stop himself. “Got any strong feelings about the foxtrot? Or Charleston?”

“No,” drawled Alastor. “But I can write you a five-page essay on all the reasons a *Courante* is superior to a *Sarabande*. ”

“I expect that on my desk by tomorrow morning,” teased Vox, delighted when Alastor’s shoulders relaxed beneath his palm.

“I’m sure you’ll be riveted,” Alastor scoffed as he pushed closer to Vox, allowing them to settle into a more natural position against one another. Vox wondered if Alastor could feel how warm he was.

He was mortified when static began bouncing off Alastor’s skin. Alastor shot him a surprised look and Vox smiled nervously.

“It’s been a while since I danced. I’m not as flexible as I used to be,” he lied.

Alastor’s brows furrowed for a moment before he smirked wickedly and dipped Vox.

Vox swallowed thickly at the hidden strength in Alastor’s frame. He needed this piece to end *now*.

“So... you like women?” Vox asked, flustered as Alastor continued pulling him around the room.

“Enough to nearly marry one,” commented Alastor lightly.

Vox nodded and before he could think it through, asked “Any men ever caught your eye?”

Alastor *winc*ed. If Vox hadn’t been pressed against him, he wouldn’t have noticed it.

“Never,” Alastor said darkly and disappointment settled in Vox’s stomach. It had no right to be there and he had known the answer to the question before he asked it. Still, the distaste in Alastor’s tone didn’t sting any less. It wasn’t anything unusual considering the time period Alastor was from, but he had hoped...

He had been a fool to let himself hope, even if only for a moment.

At least he knew. Alastor didn't suspect, so that was a bonus.

He noticed Alastor had fallen silent and he found the Radio Demon staring at him strangely, head tilted slightly to the side. Vox managed a smile before Alastor could begin asking questions.

"Same here," Vox heard himself say. He had been burned too many times - ridiculed by people he thought he could trust. If Alastor learned that he liked women *and* men, he would likely end their waltz and leap away from Vox as though scalded. Vox had learned to keep his mouth shut about his sexuality during his human life - being honest wasn't worth a broken nose and a bloodied mouth - and he couldn't see himself being any more open in Hell.

He would rather keep Alastor's friendship, thank you very much.

Still, it was hard to act *straight* when Alastor's fingers curled into the back of his shirt.

They stumbled at the four-step bar and Alastor chuckled as they parted, Vox grinning along with him; his melancholic thoughts forgotten.

Alastor took his seat once more and Vox slid in beside him, hoping Alastor didn't notice the way his fingers pressed against his palm, trying to savour the feeling of the other Overlord's hand against his.

Vox uncurled his fingers slowly, heart sinking.

...He was royally screwed.

Chapter End Notes

Of course Vox had to fall first ;) A mere crush for now...

For anyone who wants to hear the waltz: https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=vMcEbC4_1Tk

Chapter 6: Misunderstandings, Mishaps, And Manipulations

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Rosie's eyes lit up the moment she saw Vox by his side.

Whether it was out of genuine pleasure to meet him or *relief* that Alastor had spared at least one Overlord, Alastor couldn't be certain. It had been some time since their last chat over tea.

Vox was a natural performer; charming and witty and the pair of them got on like a house on fire. Alastor sipped his tea and listened quietly to the conversation, pitching in every now and again when one of them expected him to, but content to watch them form a fast friendship.

Mostly, he watched Vox. His excited smile, his genuine laugh, the way he gesticulated with such exaggerated movements as he spoke... Vox was unlike any man he had ever met. Perhaps it was because he was from a different time, a different era. Perhaps all men from Vox's decade were this ambitious and enthusiastic and entertaining. Perhaps they were all this charismatic and... and loyal.

He had a feeling that wasn't true, but he couldn't understand why it was so easy for him to get along with Vox. Men - especially powerful men like Vox - couldn't be trusted. There were few rules in life, but 'never trust a powerful man' was one Alastor swore by, yet here he was, *enjoying* his time with Vox.

The Voice constantly pointed out his hypocrisy. He had made it clear that Vox was off-limits - no matter how angry she got with him, that rule remained absolute. He wouldn't bring Vox to the bookshop and he had made Vox promise to never venture inside.

And Vox - loyal, trusting Vox - had simply nodded and stuck to his promise. He had questions, of course, questions that Alastor avoided or outright refused to answer, but he hadn't once stepped foot in that bookshop.

The Voice liked to torture him with little titbits about Vox's desires - the ones Vox kept a secret from Alastor. The passing comments were obviously an attempt at convincing him to turn on Vox, to lure him inside the bookshop.

I felt a wisp of lust from him when you leaned over to pick up your cane.

He gets aroused when you lick your lips.

He breathes your name when he masturbates in the shower.

Perhaps it was all true. Perhaps Alastor should be disgusted by the man's perverse thoughts considering his own history. Still, at least Vox kept it all to himself, unlike most sinners. Things could have been a lot worse - it was Hell after all. The few times Vox *had* got a little too suggestive, Alastor had immediately rebuked him and Vox had quickly learned his boundaries. The Television Demon was surprisingly respectful and Alastor felt... safe.

It was a foreign feeling. He could relax a little around Vox and know that Vox would never act on his lust, that he would never put his erotic desires and fantasies above their friendship. Vox would never ignore his protests, would never shove him into the dirt and hold him down and-

Alastor clenched his jaw and closed his eyes, chasing old memories away.

"You okay, Al?" Vox asked lightly and when Alastor opened his eyes, the Television Demon was smiling but there was concern in his gaze. Alastor noted the increased static in the air and he smiled apologetically and reined in the excess charge.

“Dandy,” commented Alastor before he sipped his cooling tea. Vox held his gaze for a moment longer, searching, before he plastered on a placated grin that was a little too plastic for Alastor to believe he was off the hook. Still, Vox continued his animated conversation with Rosie, who also sent Alastor a side-long glance before settling back into the topic of which sort of leather made for the best shoe.

Alastor’s gaze landed on Vox once more. Perceptive little picturebox. He didn’t miss a trick; it was almost *sweet*.

Eventually, Vox excused himself to the bathroom and Alastor was left alone with Rosie for a few minutes.

“Oh, he’s just *darling*, Alastor,” Rosie said, drawing Alastor’s gaze from the direction Vox had disappeared off to. “It’s so good to finally meet him.”

Her brow furrowed as she poured them both a fresh cup of tea. “I was getting worried about you,” she said quietly. “All this fighting with other Overlords, I thought...” She pressed her lips together and shook her head before her expression brightened. “But he keeps you grounded. You... *glow* when you’re with him. You two look adorable together!” She smiled at him warmly and he raised an eyebrow in amusement.

“Pardon?”

“I’ve got to say, I’m quite surprised at you. After everything you’ve been through, the state I found you in...” There was a flicker of anger behind her eyes before it vanished and she clasped her hands together over her lap. “Oh, but you’ve done *so* well, dear. And you’ve picked a good one! Charming, intelligent, *handsome*. The way you two look at each other, it reminds me of my last husband...” She placed a hand over her chest, reminiscing a time gone by.

Alastor allowed her a moment before he smiled lazily. “My dear, I think you may have misread the situation. Vox is my... business partner, I suppose. I’m helping him find his feet in running his own studio. We share more of a student-teacher relationship.”

Rosie giggled. “How scandalous. Don’t worry, Alastor, I’m not one to judge other people’s fun.”

Alastor stiffened and Rosie’s smile wavered. She hesitated before flicking her gaze to the opposite end of the parlour, to the small corridor that led to the bathroom.

“You two aren’t together?” she asked carefully and Alastor narrowed his eyes, smile a fraction strained.

“With the way you two look at each other, I just assumed,” said Rosie with a frown before she glanced down at her tea thoughtfully.

“Assumed *what?*” Alastor asked more viciously than he had intended and Rosie startled, looking at him warily for a moment.

Alastor grimaced, tipping his head apologetically. He rolled his shoulders, trying to ease the tension from them without success. Thinking about that sort of thing made him want to melt into the shadows and hide away from prying eyes.

An uncomfortable silence fell between them and Alastor wondered when Rosie had become so cautious around him. She visibly relaxed when Vox returned and Alastor winced. Vox was practically a stranger to her, yet she seemed to trust him more than she trusted Alastor, even after everything Alastor had shared with her...

Vox clearly recognised the tension between them, but his smile was easy as he took his seat beside Alastor, touching Alastor’s shoulder lightly in an offer of comfort.

Alastor grit his teeth, ears falling low, and Vox quickly recoiled his hand.

His silhouette twitched. Fortunately, no one but Alastor noticed. He glowered at it and it stilled once more.

Conversation resumed and Alastor let it drift over his head, carefully keeping his eyes off Vox for the remainder of the afternoon.

“Rosie’s nice,” Vox said quietly as they made their way out of Cannibal Town.

Alastor made a distracted noise of agreement and Vox’s eyebrows pinched together. Since his toilet break earlier, Alastor had seemed distant, never meeting his gaze and tension rolling off him in waves. There was a certain prickliness to his static that Vox recognised as him becoming defensive. Vox wondered what had caused the change. He had seemed so content upon arriving at Rosie’s Emporium.

“Are you alright?” Vox asked.

Alastor side-eyed him with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Perfectly fine, my dear.”

Vox was quiet for a couple of minutes as they left Cannibal Town and ventured through an empty side street.

“You can tell me, you know,” he murmured, watching Alastor’s expression from the corner of his eye. “You don’t have to hide things from me. I can keep a secret.”

Alastor’s lips remained sealed, brow furrowing slightly.

Vox ached to comfort him, to draw out whatever secrets were torturing him and wipe the frown off his face. He glanced at Alastor’s hand, pulling a face as he remembered how the Radio Demon had tensed beneath his touch earlier. He flexed his fingers, cursing his soft heart. Rule number one: Alastor couldn’t be touched.

His mind cast back to their waltz in the radio tower and he frowned.

Alastor couldn't *usually* be touched.

He licked his lips nervously, anxiety fluttering in his chest. They were so close and Alastor looked so *stiff*. If Vox could just soothe him, get him to relax his defences enough to let Vox in...

He stretched his little finger out and, as casually as he could, hooked it around Alastor's, pulsing a gentle burst of static between them.

At first, Alastor bristled and Vox began to recoil, but then Alastor curled his finger tight around Vox's and pulsed an answering burst of static between them - grateful and amused.

A smile pulled at Vox's mouth and when he side-eyed Alastor, he found the expression mirrored, albeit a little more tentative.

"Tell me?" Vox suggested, keeping his eyes on the empty street ahead of them.

Alastor squeezed his finger. "An old memory. I wouldn't like to bore you with the details."

"It's troubling you," Vox pointed out, sending another burst of reassuring charge between their linked fingers, pleased when Alastor's shoulders lowered half an inch. "Talking about it might help."

Alastor glanced at him, gaze fond. "Thank you for the offer, Picturebox, but I really am quite fine."

He wasn't but Vox didn't want to push him if he wasn't comfortable talking about it.

“If you change your mind...” Vox said pointedly and Alastor’s smile softened into something warm and affectionate and Vox couldn’t *breathe* as butterflies erupted in his chest.

When was his heart going to get the message that he couldn’t have *this*? Alastor was unattainable and there wasn’t any point in trying. These feelings he was developing were useless and pathetic and *why* couldn’t he have a crush on someone else? Someone he at least had a chance with?

Why develop a crush at all? He was in *Hell*, damn it! Crushes were for schoolgirls and tacky movies with B-rated romance plots, not up-and-coming Overlords.

Oh, but Alastor touching him at all made his heart *soar*. Vox knew he was a needy, touch-starved, attention-seeking *whore*, but how sweet it was to feel Alastor’s finger holding onto his when the Radio Demon was so touch-averse. Alastor *wanted* to touch him and that scratched all of the itches in Vox’s brain, filled all the aching holes in his chest.

He pursed his lips at his conflicting thoughts and cast his gaze to Alastor, only to find the Radio Demon studying him already.

Vox’s fans flipped on and he hoped his screen wasn’t tinted pink.

Alastor’s eyes widened a little before, surprisingly, he grinned. He pulsed teasing static between their fingers and the charge skittered up Vox’s arm, lighting every nerve ending until they tingled.

Vox’s breath hitched and he instinctively grabbed Alastor’s hand, slotting their fingers together as he responded with a slightly larger packet of playful charge. Alastor glanced at their joined hands for a moment and Vox realised he might have pushed a step too far, but then Alastor squeezed his hand affectionately before he smirked and stepped into a shadow, suddenly melting into it and reappearing a few feet down the street.

Vox stared at him for a second before he glanced at the line of street lamps beside them and grinned. He vanished into the electrics and appeared behind Alastor. He took his hand carefully, giving it a squeeze.

“Tag,” Vox whispered.

Alastor smirked as Vox vanished into the power grid.

He dissolved into the shadows and they chased one another around Pentagram City, Vox glad to see Alastor’s smile finally reaching his eyes.

Alastor threw the half-dead Overlord onto the floor of the bookshop, chest heaving and teeth grinding together. His body was bruised and aching and his skin spattered with blood - not all of it his opponent’s.

He was looking forward to a hot bath and a soft bed.

He turned towards the door.

“He wants you.”

Alastor’s ears lowered and he stifled a sigh as he tried the handle and found it jammed. “You have your prey. Kindly let me rest.”

A breathy chuckle. “Stay a while. Chat with me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I really am quite *tired*.”

“And I really am quite *bored*. Sit.”

Alastor glowered at the ceiling before the chain around his neck shimmered into view and he was suddenly yanked into the armchair at the far end of the room, hitting multiple bookshelves as he was dragged. He groaned as he was forced to sit, his bruises growing larger.

The lamp beside the chair flicked on - the only light source in the room. Alastor closed his eyes, shoulders sagging in defeat.

“He wants you to touch him.”

Alastor refused to react. The Voice was trying to get a rise out of him but he wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

“He thinks about your mouth and what he could do with it.”

Alastor opened his eyes, staring expressionlessly at the nearest bookcase. He knew she was trying to feed off his emotions - off his fear and anger. He wouldn't give them to her. They had played this game many times before and Alastor had picked up a few tricks.

“He thinks about pushing you onto your knees and forcing his cock between your lips.”

Alastor stopped his fingers from curling into the arm rests as he steadied his mind. He had learned that she lied. She really could feel certain emotions from people and she knew *everything* that happened in Hell - somehow watched their lives like they were actors on a television screen - but she could twist the truth, sprinkle lies and manipulations in with facts. That was how she got inside the heads of her victims, how she drew out the truly terrible emotions; the ones she feasted upon.

It was how she tried to get inside Alastor's head. She had learned that Vox was a weak point. She used to threaten Rosie, but that had grown stale. There was more ammunition when it came to Vox. *Insecurities*. Vox could bring out the best in him but he could also be used to

bring out the *worst*. Nightmares. Fears. *Memories*. She had quickly learned which words could be used to hurt him. She had learned how to *weaponise* Vox against him.

But Alastor had learned how to defend himself. “He doesn’t,” he deadpanned.

A dark chuckle. “He thinks about pinning you against his bed and shoving into you hard enough to make you *scream*.”

Alastor settled back against the chair. “He doesn’t,” he said again, boredly.

“He thinks about overpowering you, dominating you, making you beg for him to stop. He wants to see you *break*.”

Alastor propped his cheek against his knuckles. “He doesn’t.”

“He wants to slow dance with you.”

Alastor fell silent, taken off guard. The Voice hummed in amusement.

“He wants to hold your hand.”

Alastor’s fingers curled into his palm, remembering how Vox had slotted their fingers together the other day.

“He wants to kiss you.”

Alastor frowned.

“He’s developing feelings for you.”

He raised his eyebrows. Was she lying or telling the truth? He knew Vox had lusted after him for a time, but the Television Demon had never forced himself on Alastor. Aside from their first few meetings, Vox had never acted on those thoughts - he knew how uncomfortable that sort of thing made Alastor. Perhaps Vox flirted a little, but that was part of his charismatic personality. He hid his lustful desires from Alastor, fulfilling them with other sinners.

...Was it possible that Vox could have developed feelings for Alastor that went beyond pure lust? How?

And how was Alastor supposed to react to such complicated feelings? Vox might not be able to ignore or hide them so easily...

“Irony, isn’t it? Yet another man who’s chasing you, asking for something you’ll *never* be able to give him.”

Alastor pressed his lips together, clenching his fists slowly. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” There was amusement in her tone. “Rosie said it herself. The way he looks at you... Haven’t you noticed?”

Vox *couldn’t* want him like that. Lust after him, sure, this was *Hell*. But softer, sweeter feelings? No, Alastor had reproached him too many times, he had made his boundaries obvious. Vox couldn’t possibly have developed feelings for him when Alastor had made it so abundantly clear that he had nothing to offer.

And *especially* not to another man.

“His feelings won’t fade.” She laughed gently, like it was the funniest joke she had heard in a while. “You’re going to break his heart when you tell him *no*. ”

“He won’t ask,” growled Alastor, skin beginning to crawl. He remembered strong hands holding him down, wicked smiles, rough, probing fingers... He shook his head, ridding it of thoughts as his pulse increased, anxiety lapping at his gut. “You’re lying,” he said again, unsure who he was trying to convince.

“Am I?” she purred.

Alastor fell silent, nails biting into his palms.

“He’s only sticking around because he’s hoping for something more.”

Alastor’s ever-present smile grew strained, ears lowering. “That’s not true,” he said quietly. Was it true? He wasn’t sure how much The Voice could see and feel. She seemed to be able to watch their physical actions, and she could definitely feel pain, fear, lust, shame, anguish, and fury - *seeds*, she called them; emotions that took root and grew into terrible, evil things that shaped a person’s actions and personality. Could she feel any other emotions? Could she feel the emotions that she couldn’t feed off? Could she really hear a person’s thoughts and desires or was she manipulating Alastor into believing that she could?

“He already has your affection. Next, he’ll ask for your heart. Finally, he’ll want your body.”

A flicker of fear made its presence known in Alastor’s chest. He sucked in a deep breath, trying to quell it.

“He’ll be gentle with you. He’ll want to make it good for you.”

She had changed tactics, figured out another way to get under his skin. Panic gripped Alastor’s stomach as he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to ignore the words.

“He’ll kiss you with such adoration. He’ll start at your lips and work his way down your body. He’ll leave no inch of you untouched.”

Alastor ground his teeth together. “Stop it.”

“He’ll put a finger inside you, then another. He’ll work you open slowly while he kisses you. Next, he’ll put his tongue in you. He’ll want to taste you.”

Alastor pressed his thighs together, eyes going a little wild. His silhouette flickered. “Enough,” he hissed.

“He’ll curl his hands around your hips so possessively. He’ll wrap his lips around your cock and moan sweetly as he takes you. He’ll put that clever tongue of his to good use.”

Alastor was panting, eyes wide as his ears flattened against his skull. So many hands, pulling at his clothes, leaving bruises against his flesh, fisting his hair, sliding between his legs, teasing, exploring, *hurting*-

“He’ll slip his cock into you and kiss you. He’ll tangle his fingers in your hair and say how pretty you look beneath him. How needy you are. How *tight* you are.”

He couldn’t fight all three of them. They were big and strong and filled with drunken confidence. The twigs and stones littering the forest floor dug painfully into his back. He tried to scream but a meaty palm landed on his mouth.

“Such a pretty little thing,” cooed one of them, voice sweet and mocking.

They pawed clumsily at his clothes and he tried to kick out, to scratch and bite like a rabid animal, but they laughed and pinned him down more securely.

“We have a feisty one!” laughed a gravelly voice.

A hand slipped into his underwear and he whimpered.

“So needy,” purred a deep voice.

Two fingers forced inside him and he made a strangled groan, body going rigid.

“Tight too,” said the owner of the fingers.

Alastor opened his eyes, feeling them flickering between pupils and dials and he struggled to control his breathing. It took him a moment to realise that the cage was *open*.

He looked around wildly and found his silhouette scouring the bookshop, snarling silently and tearing books from shelves in its frustration. It turned to Alastor with a feral expression and Alastor gasped before peeling himself out of the chair and dodging its claws as it pounced. It ripped the stuffing out of the chair and Alastor raced towards the door, heart pounding as fast as a drum roll as blood gushed between his ears.

He tugged at the handle, horrified to find it still jammed.

“Please!” Alastor begged as the silhouette bounded towards him with a gaping mouth. “Open the door, please!”

The Voice chuckled softly.

Alastor darted out of the way as the silhouette lunged. He trampled over the bloodied, fallen Overlord, and hid behind a bookcase when the unconscious body was enough to distract his deranged silhouette. It tore into the other demon, slicing into his flesh with its claws and stripping muscle from bone.

The Overlord was thrust into consciousness and his screams filled the room before there was a wet sound as the silhouette began shredding organs. The demon's screams fell silent.

Alastor pressed a hand over his mouth to stifle his panicked breaths. He trembled and slid onto the floor and listened to the various cracks and *pops* of the silhouette mutilating the other Overlord. He pulled his knees to his chin, curling himself into a tight ball.

“Your fear and anguish are so delicious, Alastor,” whispered The Voice before there was the click of a door lock. “As is your *shame*.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, fighting back the tears that prickled them. He pulled his knees closer to him.

The Voice grew quiet and Alastor knew she had left. He waited for his silhouette to finish mangling the Overlord and once it seemed a little calmer, he herded it into its cage and exited the bookshop, exhausted and numb.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Rape imagery in the final section.

So, now we know a little more about Alastor's past...

Chapter 7: Flights Of Fancy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alastor looked *drained*. There was a hint of tiredness to his tone over the radio but now that Vox was staring at him, takeout in hand as he waited for the Radio Demon to play the next song, he realised that *tired* was an understatement.

“Bad day?” Vox asked as he settled into the seat beside Alastor and handed him his dinner.

Alastor’s smile was small, as though he didn’t have the energy for his usual mask. “I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Vox frowned worriedly when Alastor’s face dropped into his hands as he slouched over the mixing desk. His first instinct was to lay a comforting hand on Alastor’s back.

He choked as Alastor slammed him against the mixing desk, eyes wild as his fingers curled tightly around Vox’s throat, smile pulling into a vicious snarl.

A second later, Alastor released him, looking startled. He shuffled backwards, allowing Vox space as Vox sucked in a few gasping breaths.

Alastor ran a hand through his hair with a frown. “Apologies, Picturebox. That was... an overreaction.”

Rubbing his sore neck, Vox scowled at Alastor before the expression faded into something more sheepish. “I shouldn’t have touched you. Sorry, Al.”

With a quiet sigh, Alastor closed his eyes and took his seat again. He looked troubled and Vox wished the Radio Demon would simply *talk* to him instead of bottling up so many secrets.

“Anything I can do to help?” Vox tried.

Alastor shook his head and Vox’s shoulders sagged. He clasped his hands over his lap to prevent himself from touching Alastor again, from offering physical comfort.

It hurt to see Alastor like this, Vox realised. He pressed his lips together. He couldn’t let his developing feelings for Alastor cloud his actions. First and foremost, Alastor was his *friend*. He needed to respect Alastor’s boundaries even if his instincts were to hold the Radio Demon, to reassure and protect him from whatever secrets were causing his distress.

He waited for Alastor to finish addressing his audience before he queued up the next song. “You know you can tell me anything, right?” Vox said quietly, not quite meeting Alastor’s gaze in fear of what he might find there. This was Hell after all and he was under no illusion how emotion was seen as a weakness and trust a vulnerability. Still, it was true - Alastor could tell him anything and he would never use it against the Radio Demon. “You can, uh... You can trust me.”

Alastor was silent for a long moment and Vox risked a glance at him, finding the Radio Demon frowning at him, looking conflicted. Finally, Alastor returned his gaze to his mixing desk, ears lowering slightly.

“You shouldn’t broadcast your emotions so openly,” he murmured. “People will use them against you down here.”

Vox glanced at Alastor’s ears before staring at his own hands. “You won’t.”

“I might,” Alastor said softly. “How well do you really know me? Perhaps I have ulterior motives. Perhaps I’ll betray you when you least expect it.”

Vox side-eyed him with a small smile. “Perhaps,” he agreed. “Perhaps I have my own wicked motives. Perhaps I’ll stab you in the back the moment you tell me what’s wrong. Or perhaps

my plan is to soften you up, make you talk about your *feelings*, then watch you sprout a halo and a pair of pink, fluffy wings.”

Alastor’s smile grew a little more genuine as he traced a finger over a set of dials. “I highly doubt a serial killer is getting into Heaven any time soon.”

“I doubt *any* sinner is getting into Heaven any time soon,” Vox snorted before he fixed his gaze on Alastor. “You won’t betray me.”

Alastor threw him a sidelong glance. “How can you be so certain?”

Vox shrugged. “I just know you won’t.” He smiled lopsidedly and Alastor’s gaze softened a fraction. Vox’s chest tightened with affection. “I’d never hurt you, Al. You know that, right?”

Alastor raised his eyebrows and his ears dropped comically low for a second before returning to a neutral position as he frowned at his mixing desk. “Vox... I...” Alastor looked uncomfortable.

Shit. Vox swallowed, realising he might have revealed a little too much. He scrambled to cover his mistake. “Your ears give away your emotions, you know?”

Alastor glanced at him with a bewildered expression. “My ears...?” He looked up as though he could see them, before he focused on Vox once more.

Forcing a chuckle, Vox looked at anything that wasn’t Alastor’s adorable head tilt. “They, uh... They move a lot. When you’re happy or sad or tired or being cautious.” He cleared his throat awkwardly. “Your smile doesn’t hide as much as you think it does.”

Alastor blinked at him, ears facing forward, giving Vox his full attention. “No one has ever mentioned it before,” Alastor said slowly.

“Maybe I’m just better at reading you,” Vox said before he grimaced and hurried to correct himself. “I mean, maybe I’ve had more practice because I’m with you so often.” Oh, he really wasn’t making matters any better. “I mean- It was just an observation.” He clamped his mouth shut, hearing his fans flip on.

Alastor stared at him with wide eyes. “I’ll endeavour to... *restrain* my ear movements in future,” he said stiltedly and Vox put a hand out.

“No! No, don’t do that! That’s not what I- I *like* the little flicks and twitches and-” He clamped his mouth shut a second time and snatched his hand back. “Okay,” he mumbled.

And the award for the most pathetic sinner in Hell goes to - drumroll please...

Vox grimaced at his own thoughts.

There was another long stretch of silence and Vox slowly raised his embarrassed gaze to Alastor, surprised to find the Radio Demon... smiling affectionately at him.

The expression vanished once he caught Vox’s gaze and he quickly swivelled back to his mixing desk, plucking up his microphone and busying himself with a few sliders before the song faded out and he began speaking to his audience in a smooth, lilting voice.

Vox blinked, heart racing and chest warm as the butterflies made their presence known.

What... What just happened? What was that look?

He watched Alastor’s ears flick and twitch peculiarly. Was he... Was he *flustered*?

Vox’s eyebrows pinched together as he studied Alastor for a moment. No, that couldn’t be right. Surely he was mistaken?

Wishful thinking, that's what it was.

He shook his head at himself. Alastor had no interest in romance and other such flights of fancy. And even if he did miraculously become infatuated with the idea of a relationship, he had made it quite clear that he was heterosexual. Vox was... projecting. He needed to keep a tighter control of his own emotions instead of looking for things that weren't there - things that could never be.

Still, that didn't stop him from suddenly wanting to stroke Alastor's fascinating ears.

He shoved his fingers beneath his legs and decided that tonight he would hit the bar and find a stranger to go home with.

Preferably someone with tall, fluffy ears.

When Vox left that evening, Alastor decided to take a late-night stroll to clear his confusing thoughts.

He had felt something strange in his chest when talking with Vox earlier - a mere hint of an emotion that he refused to put a name to. He wasn't naive - he knew what the feeling was, he just didn't *believe* it. It wasn't possible. It wasn't right. The very idea *disgusted* him.

He clenched his fists, remembering The Voice's cruel words from yesterday, the fear and shame she had induced. He chased the memory from his mind. She used lies to manipulate him but that didn't mean that everything she told him was a lie. If Vox truly had developed feelings for him, then Alastor had to make sure that he didn't lead the Television Demon on.

And he had to make sure his own emotions didn't become tangled in the process.

He didn't like men, especially those with power, but there was *one* exception.

The problem was he had become too comfortable around Vox. He felt *safe* with Vox. Safe enough to tease him, to hold his hand, to *dance* with him. Vox was always honest with him, sincere and trusting to a fault. He listened to everything Alastor said, respected him greatly, brought him meals when he was working late, perked up whenever Alastor walked into the room...

He cared about Alastor, that much was obvious. He tripped up sometimes, sure, pushed a little too far or accidentally crossed a line he wasn't supposed to... but he always apologised. Always tried to make Alastor as comfortable as possible, even if he didn't really understand what he had done wrong, or didn't understand why Alastor had reacted the way he had.

And it must have been difficult to restrain himself from touching Alastor when touch was the very thing Vox desperately craved. Alastor was no fool. He knew that Vox was starved of affection, that he had deep-rooted insecurities and abandonment issues. He knew that Vox showed care and affection through touch.

Alastor was *trying*. He was trying to push through his phobia for the Television Demon, trying not to stiffen every time Vox brushed his hand or touched his shoulder, but today had been too much. He was still raw and broken from The Voice's psychological torture yesterday and Vox's hand on his back had been the final straw. He had reacted through pure instinct.

Yet, despite his panic and The Voice's manipulative words, despite the fact that the scenarios she had created filled him with dread and disgust and shame, and that it was entirely plausible that Vox might feel something for him - something he would never be able to accept or reciprocate... watching himself *strangling* Vox had horrified him. Because the truth was that he didn't want to lose Vox.

Perhaps Vox had developed tender feelings for him, but Alastor trusted Vox too much, valued his companionship too much to be pushed away by the fact. He would feign ignorance, pretend he hadn't noticed the signs, and as long as Vox didn't *say* anything, then everything would be fine between them. As long as Vox didn't ask him for something he couldn't give, then their friendship would remain strong.

And if his own heart would stop confusing a sturdy friendship with complicated feelings that he was no longer even *capable of*, then that would be *fantastic*, thank you.

His lips curled into a disdainful sneer. He needed to be extra careful not to lead Vox on. Subtle reproaches and reminders of his stance on romance, that was how he would do it. And no more dancing either. Vox would soon lose interest. They would get through this unfortunate hitch in their friendship and things would go back to normal.

His gaze caught on a brightly-lit bar teaming with patrons. He fancied a brandy. Sometimes he went unnoticed in very crowded bars and he could people-watch without them scarpering away. It was nice to watch people enjoying themselves sometimes; begging and screaming could get quite tedious after a while.

He melted into the shadows and reappeared in a dark corner of the bar, keeping his head low and his cane off the floor to attract as little attention as possible. A few people noticed and immediately vacated the area but he managed to make it to the end of the bar without much commotion. He ordered a drink and pulled a face at the volume of the music. At least the tunes were cheerful.

His gaze swept over the other patrons before landing on the dance floor and he watched idly, judging sinners' dance moves and tutting whenever they missed a step. His brandy arrived and he sipped at it before returning his gaze to the dance floor once more.

His eyes widened at the sight of Vox dancing with a male fox-demon. He was around Vox's height with striking black and orange fur, sharp golden eyes, a lithe figure wrapped in a simple black shirt with the top two buttons unfastened, smart black trousers, and a sly smile spreading across his handsome face.

His hands were all over Vox and Vox was teasing his ear with a long finger, making it flick and twitch as the fox-demon threw Vox a hungry look. They were dancing the foxtrot - how ironic - and when the fox-demon dipped Vox, he swept his tongue erotically over his neck and Vox closed his eyes for a moment, fingers curling against his partner's back.

When they resumed their normal positions, the fox-demon's hand slid to Vox's ass, squeezing firmly and Vox smirked and tilted his head up, allowing his partner to latch onto his neck greedily, biting and sucking and leaving a bruise in his wake.

The brandy glass shattered in Alastor's grip and he grimaced as the fragments sliced his skin. He glanced down at the sticky mess of glass shards in surprise, leaning back slightly when the bartender hurried over to clean everything up.

He cast his gaze back to the dancefloor, gritting his teeth when he noticed how *close* Vox and his partner were. How their bodies were pressed against one another as they danced, how Vox was toying with a soft ear, how his partner had a possessive hand around Vox's throat, how sultry Vox's gaze was-

"Hey there, gorgeous. Is this seat taken?"

Alastor snarled at the drunken sinner before disappearing into the shadows and reappearing in a different corner of the room. His gaze flicked over the dance floor before he located Vox and the fox-demon once more - Vox pinned against the wall as the fox-demon *ravished* him, one of Vox's legs thrown carelessly over his partner's hip, their hands roaming over one another's bodies, and the fox-demon's fingers shifting to cup between Vox's legs.

A low growl rattled out of Alastor's chest and he started towards the pair before stopping himself with a frown.

Wait, what was he doing?

He took a step backwards, then another, heart hammering loudly in his chest and bile crawling up his throat as he watched the fox-demon fondle Vox through his trousers. With a chuckle, Vox caught his partner's wrist and whispered something into a large ear, and it earned him a filthy look from the fox-demon and a wicked smile.

They pushed off the wall and Alastor retreated into the shadows, out of their line of vision, as he watched them shove through the crowd and towards the exit, hands linked.

Alastor's nails bit into his palms and he realised his ears were flat.

He should be pleased that Vox had found an outlet for his misplaced desires. He should be relieved that Vox's affections for him would likely fade if he was sleeping with other sinners.

So, why did he feel *angry*?

Hurt.

He bared his teeth, mood souring, and left the bar.

Vox stifled a groan as he rolled onto his side. His body *ached*.

He noticed a spatter of blood on the sheets and threw the sleeping fox-demon beside him a disdainful glance before sliding out of bed. He grimaced at the pain in his left arm and inspected the deep gash over his bicep, where sharp claws had grown a little too rough with him.

He stood, rubbing his bruised and bloodied thighs, pulling a face at the puncture wounds littering them. Teeth marks. The damn fox should have gone to the kitchen for a snack if he was that hungry.

He headed towards his discarded clothes and cursed softly at the pain in his ass that radiated up his back. His partner hadn't been at all gentle with him last night.

He leaned down stiffly to snatch his clothes.

"Going somewhere?" purred that smug, nasally voice. It was an annoying sound, carrying an undeserved air of superiority that rubbed Vox the wrong way. Vox had managed to ignore it

last night for the sake of the smoking body and big, fluffy ears. Mostly the ears.

“Didn’t mean to wake you,” muttered Vox as he began pulling his clothes on.

“I’m a light sleeper,” whispered the fox-demon, suddenly right behind Vox. “You never know when your *conquests* might try to push a blade through your chest.”

Vox grimaced as wandering hands snaked around him, claws raking over his chest. He peeled them away from his body and gave his partner - what was his name again? Len... Lance... Lorry... Lau... Laurice? It didn’t matter.

“Well, no worries on that front from me,” Vox said with a saccharine smile. “I’ll be out of your hair in two minutes.”

He shrugged his shirt on, scowling when the fox-demon pressed against his back and dipped his hand beneath Vox’s unfastened trousers, fondling his soft cock.

“What’s the rush?” the fox-demon purred as one of his claws bit into Vox’s already bruised stomach. Vox grit his teeth and whirled around, shoving harshly at the sinner’s chest. Golden eyes narrowed at him, that sly smile widening a little as the sinner mistook Vox’s distaste for a challenge. “Don’t be so coy now, Picturebox.”

Vox bared his teeth. “It’s *Vox*, ” he growled, skin crawling at Alastor’s nickname for him falling off this slimy sinner’s tongue. “Thanks for last night, but I’m going home.” He glanced down at himself with a sneer. “I’m going to have an ice bath to stop the bruises from *spreading*. ”

An irritating chuckle. “You begged me to mark you last night. Don’t take it out on me now that you’re starting to feel the consequences.”

“A couple of bruises would have been fine,” said Vox with a sharp smile that he was pretty certain he had learned from a certain Radio Demon. “But I look like I’ve been in a bar fight.”

He straightened, rubbing his back. “And did you really have to *pile drive* me against the dresser? I feel like I’ve gone ten rounds with an oil drill.”

The fox-demon (*Larien*. His name was Larien. Stupid name) smirked and pressed into Vox’s space again, fingers wrapping suddenly around his throat. “You whimper so deliciously when you’re in pain...”

Vox placed a hand against his chest and discharged a low voltage through him and Larien yelped, stumbling away from him.

Vox smiled dangerously. “I’m going home. Stop me again and I’ll fry your brain into a *soup*.”

Larien scowled as Vox finished dressing. He made it halfway to the door before Larien grabbed him and shoved him against the wardrobe.

“If you play with fire, be prepared to get *burned*,” whispered Larien as his entire body set alight in a deep, orange flame. Vox hissed as his skin blistered where Larien was gripping his wrists and a few warning messages about overheating screamed for his attention.

He squeezed his eyes shut, fighting against the pain for a moment, before he fixed his gaze on the other sinner, left eye swirling in a hypnotic fashion.

“Let me go.”

Larien bared his teeth, fighting the command.

“Let me go,” Vox growled firmly and the grip on his wrists eased before Larien backed off.

“Don’t follow me,” Vox hissed, not daring to look at his wrists despite the agony blossoming from them. He left Larien’s apartment and slammed the door behind him.

Bile crawled up his throat and he risked a glance at his melted wrists, breath hitching sharply at the mess of bloody tissue, bone, and wires melding together.

He heaved, last night's alcohol tasting bitter and stale on his tongue. He pulled his sleeves gingerly over the mangled flesh so he wouldn't have to look at the wounds again. They would heal, eventually.

He needed food, something to settle his stomach.

He headed to the nearest twenty four-hour convenience store and bought a selection of pastries before making his way over to Alastor's home. They hadn't had breakfast together for a few weeks and Vox found a smile pulling at his lips at the prospect.

He knocked at Alastor's door, wincing at the pain in his wrist.

Alastor opened the door after a few moments with a frown and Vox's eyes tracked to his open collar, lack of tie, and absent waistcoat. Wearing just a shirt and trousers, Alastor was practically *naked*. Heat crept up Vox's neck. He had never seen the Radio Demon in so few layers.

"Vox," Alastor greeted slowly. "What brings you here this early?"

Vox frowned in confusion before he checked his internal clock and his eyes widened before he ducked his head sheepishly.

5:47 a.m.

No wonder the high street had been empty - Vox had wondered about that. "Uh, sorry. I didn't check the time, if you can believe that..."

Alastor studied him for a moment before throwing the door open and Vox shuffled inside with a weak grin. When Alastor locked the door, Vox's shoulders sagged with relief.

"Fun night?" Alastor asked drily and Vox grimaced.

"Yeah, I suppose." His back twinged and he frowned. "No. Not really."

Alastor raised an eyebrow and Vox averted his gaze awkwardly.

"I brought breakfast," he said brightly, holding up the bag of pastries before he grimaced. "But, uh... if you'd rather get a little more sleep, that's fine too. I'll just make myself comfortable on the couch and-"

Alastor was suddenly in front of him, reaching for his arm and ignoring the bag in his hand. He rolled Vox's sleeve up gently but Vox still flinched at the burst of pain in his wrist.

Alastor's expression folded into one of fury and he pushed the sleeve higher, exposing the bruises peppering his arm. With a growl, he grabbed Vox's other arm and rolled the sleeve up, revealing the mangled skin beneath.

"Who did this?" he demanded, teeth bared like a vicious wolf.

For a moment, Vox couldn't get his mouth to work. Heat curled in his stomach and he was winded by the sight of Alastor so protective over him, holding his arm delicately, like he was something *precious*.

"Vox," Alastor snapped, unbridled outrage dancing in his eyes. "Who did this to you? Give me a name."

Vox huffed in amusement. "He isn't worth the effort. It'll heal, don't worry."

Alastor's shoulders tensed, ears falling flat with anger. He dropped his gaze to Vox's wrist, holding it carefully as he traced feather-light fingers over Vox's bruised forearm. Vox's breath hitched at the tenderness but Alastor didn't seem to notice.

He took the bag from Vox's grip and placed it on the floor before he cradled both of Vox's wrists in his gentle hands. He swept his thumbs over burned and blistered flesh, muttering something beneath his breath, and green symbols lit the floor and sparked in the air around him.

Vox watched in silent awe as the muscles and tendons and flesh wove themselves together again, hiding cables and bone. Once the process was complete, the glowing symbols faded, and Alastor rubbed his thumbs over Vox's healed wrist once more, checking his work.

Vox's heart pounded so loudly against his ribcage that he wondered if Alastor could hear it. He found his gaze locked onto Alastor's face, admiring the pinch of his eyebrows and the fire in his gaze. He was ready to *kill* for Vox. All Vox had to do was give him a name.

It would be incredibly difficult to stop himself from falling in love with this man, Vox realised, his heart sinking. No amount of one-night stands and hook-ups would be enough to distract him from his rapidly growing feelings. It didn't matter that he knew he could never have the Radio Demon - his heart had set its sights on him and it would always long for him.

Damn it.

"Give me a name, Vox," Alastor said quietly, still studying his wrists.

"He isn't worth it," Vox murmured with a small smile.

Alastor looked at him sharply. "*You* are worth it," he growled and Vox was struck speechless for the second time that morning.

Alastor seemed to realise what he had said and he dropped his gaze again, scowling at Vox's arms. Vox stared at him, a tiny thread of hope hooking into his chest before he could convince himself that Alastor was just being a good, protective friend.

"He was just a hook-up from the bar last night," Vox said. "Things got a little rougher than I expected. When I tried to leave this morning, he got a little handsy. When I pushed him away, he got... hot-headed. A bit *fiery*." He grinned at his own joke but the expression dimmed at Alastor's dark look.

"What was his name?"

Vox's pulse stuttered. "Larien," he whispered and Alastor's smile twitched before he lowered his gaze to Vox's arms again. He dropped one in favour of cradling the other, slowly brushing the fingers of his free hand over Vox's unblemished forearm, over his wrist, and to his palm before riding back up again and repeating the process. On his second pass, Vox closed his fingers over Alastor's once they reached his palm, trapping them there and rolling his thumb over Alastor's bare knuckles.

Alastor tilted his head a little, watching Vox's thumb caress his knuckles and a comfortable silence settled between them.

Vox was suddenly overwhelmed with affection for the Radio Demon and he found himself carefully leaning forwards and pressing his head against Alastor's.

Alastor sucked in a sharp breath and Vox swallowed before pulsing a tiny burst of reassuring charge between their foreheads.

At first, Alastor hesitated, then his shoulders lowered, inch by inch and Vox closed his eyes, imagining for a moment that he could have *this*. That he could have this beautiful, protective, wily man that made his heart flutter. He imagined that, for once in his miserable existence, he was *loved*. That someone genuinely cared for him and wanted to stay and hold him and tell him that he mattered, that he was important to at least one person. That someone was proud of him and didn't need him to do something for them other than *be there*.

Alastor squeezed his fingers tighter and Vox smiled at the comforting pulse of static he received.

They stayed like that for a few minutes, concentrating on one another's subtle frequencies and making tiny adjustments until they layered over one another like a sweet harmony. Vox released a shaky breath and Alastor swallowed thickly at the overwhelming sensation and Vox found himself pulling Alastor a fraction nearer, needing to be close to the demon that complemented him so perfectly.

And Alastor *allowed it*. He allowed Vox to pull him that little bit closer, allowed Vox to increase the static, letting it pop affectionately off his skin. Better than that, Alastor upped his own static, shifted his grip on Vox's hand until their fingers were slotted between each other, palms together.

There was something desperate in the way Alastor pushed his head against Vox's, as though he was searching for comfort, as though their harmonising frequencies had broken some sort of dam inside him.

His ears lowered and Vox realised he was trembling ever-so-slightly, eyes squeezed shut, and his heart ached for whatever Alastor was suddenly struggling with. He swallowed and carefully raised his spare hand to one of Alastor's ears, petting it lightly.

Alastor froze and Vox could feel his static nipping at his skin with his rising panic, his frequency falling out of harmony with Vox's own.

"Easy, Smiles," whispered Vox, not quite ready to let go of Alastor, not ready to give up this sort of tenderness he had never experienced before. "You're safe. Relax." The words were instinctive. He didn't want to push Alastor too far out of his comfort zone, but he had a feeling that Alastor needed this as much as Vox himself did.

Their frequencies slotted into place once more and Alastor's static settled. Vox's light petting turned into an ear massage and he felt Alastor's head tilt towards his palm the deeper his massage became.

Alastor's breathing slowed and Vox smiled, eyes still closed as he turned Alastor's hand over and rubbed his thumb in a firm circular motion around his palm. It was strange to see Alastor without gloves but Vox relished the feeling of warm skin beneath his own.

Alastor made a soft, breathy sound at the back of his throat.

"Is that an approving noise or an uncomfortable noise?" Vox whispered, pausing his ministrations for a moment.

"Approving," Alastor managed quietly and Vox's smile grew as he restarted his palm and ear massage.

This was nice. Just the two of them, Alastor looking soft and sleepy and only half-dressed, Vox warm and relaxed and *healed* in Alastor's living room, the light of the quiet, early morning beginning to shine through the windows...

Vox teaching Alastor how to enjoy touch.

He squeezed the base of Alastor's ear, leaving no strand of fur untouched and when he began rubbing Alastor's fingers, manipulating them one by one and flexing each knuckle, Alastor made another needy sound as though overcome with relief.

"Vox," he whispered, voice cracking.

Vox huffed a laugh, blanketing Alastor with fond, contented static. "Thank you for healing me," he murmured. He played with Alastor's fingers for another couple of minutes before releasing his hand and ear. Alastor frowned and tried to pull away, but Vox quickly took Alastor's other hand and started massaging his opposite ear and Alastor made a choked noise before melting all over again.

Vox chuckled warmly and studied Alastor for a little while since their heads were still pressed together.

His heart fluttered at the sleepy contentment resting on Alastor's face. Vox had never seen a man more gorgeous than Alastor. A smile pulled at his mouth. If he couldn't have Alastor's heart, then perhaps he could have this; this quiet, gentle affection. These small, tender moments of trust and vulnerability.

This was enough. He was happy with this.

After a few moments, Alastor pulled away, but it was reluctant and his fingers brushed against Vox's as he withdrew his arm. He met Vox's gaze with a small, grateful smile and Vox returned the expression, soft and intimate, feeling entirely breathless.

"Breakfast?" Vox suggested quietly and Alastor nodded and gestured for him to follow him into the kitchen.

Vox felt like he was floating. Alastor wasn't flinching, wasn't trying to avoid his gaze, wasn't asking him to leave... He looked *comfortable*.

Vox's smile grew into a grin as Alastor poured them both some tea and Vox grabbed some plates for the pastries. They moved around each other with practised ease, never getting in each other's way and despite the silence that had settled, it was... peaceful.

They took their seats at the small bistro table and Vox's gaze was drawn to Alastor as he sipped his tea. Alastor met his gaze over the rim of his cup and Vox grinned cheekily, delighted when Alastor's smile widened, eyes sparkling with amusement and... and something else. Something that was gone too fast for Vox to identify.

Alastor lowered his cup as a familiar smirk stretched over his face.

"So, this *Larien*... You wouldn't happen to remember his address, would you?"

Oh you just know that the sweeter they are now, the more broken they'll be later :)

UPDATE: *Epic_Name* has made some beautiful artwork for this chapter that you should definitely check out!

<https://www.tumblr.com/pb4b/757033089261338624/fanart-for-dancingdogs-fic-called-a-gentle-touch?source=share>

<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSYceDbQn/>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C93q7zPS1yy/?igsh=MWpucTQ5OTl6MXBxdg==>

Chapter 8: The Benefits Of Emotional Suppression And Repression

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Alastor rubbed his thumb over his palm with a small smile, remembering how Vox had made him feel last week. *Of course* it would be Vox who broke through his shields, who reassured him, who was determined and patient enough to prove to him that he didn't have to suffer a full-blown panic-attack every single time he was touched. Of course it would be Vox who made him feel safe, who showed him that there was hope he could tolerate touch again, maybe even *enjoy* it.

He hadn't felt this light in a long time. He hadn't felt this hopeful in a long time.

The Voice was wrong. It didn't matter that Vox was developing feelings for him, the fact was that Vox would never push Alastor past his breaking point, he would never jeopardise their friendship - that much was obvious with the way he had 'checked in' with Alastor after he'd made a (frankly quite pathetic) sound.

Vox hadn't taken advantage of Alastor in such a vulnerable state, hadn't tried to weasel any information out of him, hadn't tried to push him for more than he was willing to give. He had merely held Alastor. Stroked his ears and massaged his hands and leaned their heads together. He had offered Alastor comfort at a time he hadn't even realised he had needed it.

Oh, and the way their frequencies had moulded so wonderfully together! The feeling of Vox's static skittering across his skin like that... How had he gone so long without another media demon by his side? Another sinner that not only could he match wits with, but one that complemented his powers so wholly, one that utilised charge and airwaves as effectively and easily as he did!

Vox was simply *fantastic*.

And- *and* let's not forget, disappointed by that fox-demon's *efforts*, who did Vox come running to?

Alastor smirked smugly to himself. How satisfying it was to know that after the tasteless display at the bar, Vox had tossed that useless pile of trash to the curb and immediately sought out Alastor.

It was gratifying to see Vox knew who he *really* belonged to.

Alastor paused his stroll, blinking at himself in surprise. Where had *that* come from?

Is that how he really felt?

He frowned and shook his head. Vox wasn't *his*. They weren't even... They were friends. Good friends. The sort of friends that were almost impossible to find in Hell. But there wasn't anything more to the relationship - Alastor couldn't give anything more. He... He didn't want to. He wasn't *capable* of it.

He glanced down at his palm.

...Was he?

He stopped by a cafe and arrived at the television station a few minutes later, pausing to watch Vox order people around and explain something to the set designer, gesticulating exaggeratedly as he spoke. Alastor observed him fondly, a warm feeling in his chest. Vox was so... energetic. Expressive. He was a fun distraction amidst all the misery Alastor had faced.

Once Vox was finished with the designer, Alastor approached and pushed a coffee into Vox's hands. Their fingers brushed and Alastor didn't flinch, wasn't overwhelmed with panic, didn't feel the need to snatch his hand away.

Vox smiled and accepted the cup gratefully and Alastor stood beside him, watching employees scuttle around the set like frantic rats.

“New show?” he asked curiously and Vox nodded.

“We’re a little behind schedule but it’ll work out.” He winked at Alastor. “Can’t tell them though. They might try to sit back and then we really will be in trouble.”

“If you’re busy, I can leave?” Alastor offered and Vox shook his head.

“Stay. Keep me company.”

That was a nice change - being asked to stay. So many people fled at the sight of Alastor that it was good to be asked to stick around, for Vox to *want* his company.

“I have a little paperwork to finish,” said Vox as he gestured for Alastor to follow him. “Come talk to me.”

Alastor trotted after him and decided to forgo a chair in favour of perching on Vox’s desk merely to see if it would irritate him. Vox shot him a dry look but didn’t shoo him off.

They talked about inconsequential things as Vox worked, things that Vox wouldn’t have to pay much attention to, and eventually Alastor’s focus wandered to the antennae atop Vox’s head.

He remembered how relaxing it had been to have Vox stroke his ears and he wondered if the antennae were like ears. Could Vox feel anything through them? Were they sensitive? Or were they solely used for receiving broadcasting signals?

He glanced at Vox and found him concentrating on a particular paragraph. He extended a finger and poked the top of one antenna.

It buzzed quietly and Vox continued to stare at his paperwork but it was very clear that he was no longer reading it. Intrigued, Alastor swept his finger gently over the top of the antenna and slid a finger and thumb down the length of the thin rod. It sparked beneath his fingers and when Alastor glanced at Vox, the Television Demon was side-eying him silently. He didn't look uncomfortable so Alastor returned his attention to the antenna and put a little pressure on it, watching it bounce back into place once he released it.

"Having fun?" Vox teased as Alastor twanged the antenna again.

"Very much so," hummed Alastor. "How does it feel?"

"Extremely painful."

Alastor stilled his finger midway through sliding down the shaft of the antenna. He gave Vox a wide-eyed look and Vox grinned.

"I'm messing with you. It's... nice. Relaxing."

Alastor narrowed his eyes and flicked the antenna.

"Ow," Vox said, pouting as both antennae sparked.

Alastor stopped it from bouncing and resumed his exploration. He wrapped his palm around the rod and pulsed a wave of static through it. Vox made an approving sound and suddenly pitched forwards, letting his head fall onto his arms.

Alastor tilted his head in amusement and continued to emit a low trickle of constant charge through the antenna as he toyed with it, fascinated by the blue bolts of electricity that began

passing between the tips of both antennae.

He touched the steady spark of lightning curiously to see if it would shock him and was pleasantly surprised when it merely tickled his fingertips.

He glanced down at Vox and found the other Overlord watching him with an affectionate smile, gaze soft and warm and adoring and-

There was a flutter in Alastor's chest.

It had been a long time since anyone had looked at him like that.

He swallowed. It had been a long time since anyone had made him feel this way - content and safe and respected. His fingers slid down Vox's antenna, brushed across the top of his boxy head, and grazed the edge of his casing, settling there as he studied Vox's face.

Vox leaned into his touch almost desperately and Alastor's chest *ached*. Vox was responsive to any sort of touch, any scrap of attention thrown his way. He was obviously touch-starved or perhaps just affection-starved in general, and Alastor decided that he would take it upon himself to rectify that.

He didn't want another repeat of last week - of Vox looking for affection from someone else and then using his desperation as an excuse to take advantage of him, to *hurt* him.

Alastor would give Vox what he craved. There was no need for him to find someone else, to risk himself.

He spread his palm flat over the side of Vox's head, smoothing it slowly over the full depth of his casing and watching his face carefully for his reaction. Vox's eyes widened for a moment before they fluttered shut and he leaned further into Alastor's hand. Pleased, Alastor explored the vast expanse of Vox's casing, light and curious at first before pressing a little firmer, cupping his corners and stroking his vents and tracing over the ports at the back of his head.

Vox's eyes flew open and he stared up at Alastor when he began exploring the ports.

"Everything alright?" Alastor asked quietly and Vox managed a shaky nod.

Alastor pulsed a burst of charge through one of the ports and Vox's screen brightened for a moment before he reached for Alastor's knee. Before he made contact, he glanced up at Alastor.

"Can I...?" he croaked.

Alastor hesitated then steeled himself and nodded. Vox laid a hand over his knee and it was obvious that he just wanted to touch Alastor, perhaps wanted to ground himself, but as he rubbed his thumb in soothing circles over the side of Alastor's knee, Alastor felt the tension easing from his frame.

He sent another pulse of energy through one of Vox's ports as their frequencies began to align and Vox lifted his gaze and stared at Alastor with such contentment and *devotion*-

Alastor's pulse quickened as Vox squeezed his knee.

He drew his palm to the side of Vox's face, sweeping his thumb lightly over the glass of his screen. Vox's hand slid slightly higher, splaying protectively, *possessively* over Alastor's thigh.

Rough hands gripped his thighs, forcing them apart as he tried to scream against the palm over his mouth. There was a round of drunken laughter from the men above him as they pulled his trousers off. He kicked out at the closest one, striking him hard in the stomach and as a punishment, he was smacked across the face, harsh enough to bruise.

The hands prised his thighs apart again, fingers digging deep into muscle as a stiff cock forced into him for the second time that night. Tears spilled over his cheeks as he clawed at the hands pinning him down.

Alastor tumbled off the edge of the desk, chest heaving and eyes wide as he fell gracelessly onto the floor. Vox was immediately beside him, bewildered as he reached out to help Alastor up.

Hands reached for him as he tried to scramble away. He made it two, maybe three steps before they grabbed him and bent him over. They spanked his ass hard and fast, again and again until he sobbed at the pain and humiliation. Then they pulled at his hair and cooed at him mockingly before forcing him to his knees and thrusting into his raw entrance as one of them urinated on his face.

Vox was choking. Alastor looked up to find him tugging at a shadow that had coiled tightly around his neck. Alastor recalled the shadow quickly but Vox launched towards him, gaze panicked and he threw himself over Alastor, sparks of electricity dancing wildly over his frame.

Alastor couldn't breathe. Vox was *too close*. Instinctively, he commanded his shadows to rear above Vox, ready to hurl him across the room.

His silhouette suddenly pounced on Vox, raking its claws through his back before it screamed silently and staggered away from him and the bright sparks ricocheting off his body. Vox grit his teeth and Alastor stilled, eyes wide as he realised that Vox was *protecting* him.

The silhouette threw itself at Vox again like a feral animal and Vox upped the current, more sparks skittering through his frame even as the silhouette sunk its claws into his sides. Vox grunted in agony and the silhouette snarled and leapt backwards again, flexing its fingers in obvious pain. It circled Vox, looking for a weak point.

Vox bared his teeth at it, ensuring Alastor was fully beneath him - that the silhouette couldn't drag him away and tear into him.

Alastor's heart raced as he stared up at Vox, stunned. He flicked his gaze to the crazed silhouette.

"He's not a threat," Alastor snarled. "He's protecting me."

The silhouette hesitated, glancing between Vox and Alastor for a moment. It looked confused.

That was new.

"What happened wasn't his fault," Alastor tried slowly and the silhouette straightened a little, looking far less deranged than before.

Interesting.

"Get back in your cage," Alastor said carefully and the silhouette scowled and hissed at Alastor but didn't run at them.

"Get back in your cage," Alastor said firmly. "Don't make me hurt you."

The silhouette narrowed its gaze before slinking towards Alastor. Vox let him sit upright and the shadow neared Alastor, sending Vox a suspicious glance before suddenly grinning and slashing a claw through Alastor's cheek.

Alastor hissed and Vox blasted sparks at the silhouette and slid in front of Alastor once more.

Alastor stared angrily at the bloody mess of Vox's back and his body twisted and cracked and grew into something monstrous as he prowled towards the suddenly nervous silhouette. He

commanded his other shadows to wrap around the silhouette's limbs and pin it down, and for two more shadows to strike it mercilessly.

The silhouette trembled and stared up at him fearfully as Alastor's smile pulled into something sharp and dangerous. Tears opened up in the silhouette's form, huge gaping wounds alongside smaller distortions and the silhouette struggled against the shadows restraining it, squeezing its eyes shut at the pain as it was tortured.

Finally, Alastor recalled his shadows and the silhouette curled onto its side and shook.

"Get back in your cage," Alastor growled.

The silhouette melted into him and Alastor's shoulders sagged with relief as he shifted into his natural form.

He turned to Vox tiredly. He always felt drained after an altercation with his silhouette.

"Turn around," Alastor said gently and Vox did as asked, silent and thoughtful and not at all afraid. Alastor inspected the wounds on his back and those creeping around his sides.

"What is that thing?" Vox asked as Alastor began the healing ritual. Once the chant was finished and Vox was fully repaired, Alastor stepped back and allowed Vox to turn to him.

"My unreasonable silhouette."

"Yeah but... is it a part of you? Is it a parasite that leeches off your energy? What *is* it?" Vox asked.

"I don't know," Alastor admitted.

Vox frowned at the slash in his cheek and Alastor touched the wound with distaste. Unfortunately, he couldn't seem to heal the wounds his silhouette inflicted upon him. They would, of course, heal naturally over time and with his level of power, they would heal quickly.

"It appears when you're stressed," Vox said quietly and Alastor smiled to himself. Perceptive little picturebox.

"Yes," agreed Alastor. "It has been suggested that it's a part of me, that it feels my emotions somehow."

Vox raised an eyebrow and Alastor scoffed. "My sentiments exactly. I know I can get carried away sometimes, but I don't think I'm that *rabid*."

Vox frowned and Alastor tilted his head. "...You disagree?"

There was a long pause. "You looked... panicked when you fell off the desk." He hesitated as he caught Alastor's gaze. "...Afraid. Traumatized, even."

Alastor clenched his teeth and Vox seemed uncertain. "...What were you thinking about?"

"Nothing," Alastor said tightly, far too hurriedly. "Nothing important anyway. Nothing that affects me now."

"...It didn't look like *nothing*."

"Curiosity killed the cat, Vox," Alastor growled and Vox's shoulders slumped.

"Come on, Al. You know I would never use anything you told me against you. You know-"

“I know you’re becoming a little too familiar,” Alastor snapped. He could feel his own shields rising, his tone becoming venomous to keep everyone away, to keep them from *touching* him. “Putting your filthy hands all over me, sliding those wandering fingers over my thigh. I told you not to touch. I warned you to keep away-”

“Al, I’m sorry,” Vox said gently. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

Alastor squeezed his eyes shut, knuckles white as he took a steadying breath. He shouldn’t be taking his frustrations out on Vox - the one demon that had stuck around despite his attempts to scare him off. He sighed.

“I know you didn’t. It wasn’t your fault. I just... It was...”

“Too much?” Vox asked softly, patiently, understanding as always. Alastor really didn’t deserve this man.

“Yes,” Alastor whispered.

Vox eyed him for a long moment. “Perhaps that silhouette doesn’t just *feel* your emotions. Perhaps it’s a part of them? Or maybe forms from them?”

Alastor snapped his gaze up in surprise and Vox tapped his screen thoughtfully. “Maybe it’s like... a manifestation of your feelings? Only appearing when you’re overwhelmed by emotion?”

Alastor snorted. “I highly doubt that, Vox. If it’s a manifestation of my own emotions, then why does it attack me?”

Vox fell quiet for a moment before his eyebrows dipped. “Maybe because you attack it?”

“Self defence,” protested Alastor. “It always initiates the fight.”

Vox pulled a face, lost in thought. "...Maybe-" He cut himself off and shook his head, looking a little flustered.

"Maybe what?"

Vox gave him a startled look before smiling weakly and shaking his head again. "Uh, nothing."

"Vox."

He grimaced.

"*Vox.*"

The Television Demon hesitated before pulling a face. "...Maybe it's like a metaphor? If that thing is your emotions, maybe it's you being at war with yourself? Or maybe it's all the bad parts you don't want to think about, all the stuff you don't want to feel, and it's trying to get your attention...? Because you haven't, uh... dealt with it properly?" Vox scratched the back of his neck, looking at anything that wasn't Alastor.

Alastor stared at Vox. "...You think I have suppressed feelings and the silhouette is a personification of that?"

Vox winced. "...Maybe?"

"Do you have any idea how utterly ridiculous that sounds?" Alastor huffed. It didn't sound ridiculous. It actually sounded highly plausible, if not very probable. But Alastor didn't want that to be true because it would imply that he had to *face* his suppressed feelings - and they were suppressed for a reason. He didn't want to relive those blasted memories and work through his emotions. He knew how he felt and he didn't *want* to feel that way.

The silhouette could *rot* in its cage.

Vox pursed his lips. He clearly liked the theory and thought it likely. So did Alastor, but he didn't want to admit to it because he had a feeling that Vox would try to get him to work through his suppressed (and repressed) emotions without even knowing the cause behind them.

And it wasn't like he could discuss his past with Vox, a past full of humiliation and shame and *filth*. Weakness. He was tainted. Broken. If Vox knew, he would never respect him again. He would be disgusted. He would see Alastor as weak and soiled and *fragile*. He didn't want Vox to look at him like that. Vox might not take advantage like other sinners, but their friendship would be ruined. Vox would get bored of him. He would lose his mystery and Vox would ask him to leave. Push him away like Harriet did. Like Rosie was in the process of doing. Like *everyone* did when they found out what had happened to him. What he had *let* happen.

No. Those feelings could stay suppressed. He had no intention of losing Vox.

"I think you should consider it," Vox grumbled. "I think it's a good theory."

Alastor forced a smile, deciding to humour Vox for the sake of his pride. "Alright. I'll think about it."

Vox clearly thought he was lying and pouted at him. He really was quite adorable.

Alastor blinked. *Another feeling for the cage of suppression.*

"Well, I think I've caused enough excitement for today," Alastor drawled as he headed towards the door. "I'll leave you to your paperwork. Cheerio!"

Vox looked startled. “Wait, Al-”

Alastor let the door close behind him as he melted into the shadows before Vox could chase after him.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Rape imagery in italic sections

Oh look at Al becoming hopeless for his clever picturebox ;)

Chapter 9: Things That Hide In The Shadows

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The Voice hadn't specified an Overlord this time, so Alastor hadn't brought her one. He dumped the unconscious and bloodied Larien on the floor, making sure he smacked his head against the bookshelves upon his descent.

"You really ought to beat some manners into that shadow of yours."

Alastor clenched his fists and kicked Larien hard in the side for lack of anywhere else to direct his frustrations.

"You've been far too easy on it. It behaves erratically because you let it."

"What is it?" Alastor growled. "Is Vox correct? Is it a manifestation of my emotions? Why does it only appear when I'm stressed?"

There was a long pause. "He really is quite clever, that little picturebox of yours."

"He isn't-" Alastor shook his head and scowled at Larien's still form. "How do I control it?"

"Violence is the only language it knows."

She had said it countless times but today the words made Alastor purse his lips. "If it's a consequence of my emotions, would violence not exacerbate its behaviour?"

“Would you prefer a chat over a cup of tea and a selection of finger sandwiches?” She sounded amused.

Alastor’s ears lowered a fraction, smile tight. “I’d *prefer* not to have it at all. It’s quite the nuisance.”

“That’s one word for it,” hummed The Voice. “I, for one, am quite a fan of the fear it invokes in your box-headed *boyfriend*.”

Alastor bristled, earning himself a breathy chuckle.

“Don’t get me wrong, the *lust* oozing from Vox when you were toying with his antennae was delicious too, but there is a certain sweetness to fear that is unrivalled by every other emotion, every other *seed*.”

She was lying. Vox hadn’t been aroused when Alastor was toying with his antennae; he had certainly enjoyed the sensation, but there was no lust in his gaze. Only affection. Warmth. *Adoration*.

Alastor’s fingers curled into his palm, recalling the way Vox had leaned into his touch, the way his own thumb had swept across the glass of Vox’s screen, the way his heart had *fluttered*-

He closed his eyes. Those were dangerous thoughts. Vox was a *man*. His dearest friend, of course, but still a man. One who was growing in power with every new soul he collected. There might come a time when he rivalled Alastor’s power, when his lust and desire grew too great for him to ignore and he used that power to restrain Alastor, to hold him down and have his way with him, because Alastor was weak and pathetic and a damn *coward*-

He frowned and unclenched his fists slowly. What was he thinking? Vox wouldn’t... Vox would *never* do that to him. Vox had thrown his own body over Alastor to protect him from his shadow, uncaring if he got mauled in the process. If that wasn’t an act of love, then-

He inhaled sharply, quietly, ears falling flat as his eyes widened.

He couldn't-

He wasn't-

There was a dark chuckle. "*Oh...* Alastor. You *like* him, don't you?"

Alastor bared his teeth viciously as his thoughts raced. He was getting ahead of himself. Vox wasn't *in love* with him. He couldn't be. A fleeting crush, perhaps, and him throwing himself in the way of the silhouette had been a simple act of strong friendship.

Lust was easy to ignore, and a silly crush with enough rejections and time would soon fade, but *love*...? Love was complicated. Love *hurt*. Love was cruel and merciless and made people vulnerable. His mother and father had loved him, and look what had happened to them.

Love was a filthy lie. Harriet claimed she loved him and then when he had needed her the most, when he had *needed* her love, her support, she recoiled from him, her 'love' unmasking itself into disgust, and she had left him like his friends and everyone else who supposedly *loved* him.

Vox wasn't allowed to love him. Vox *couldn't* love him. Alastor wouldn't let him.

He couldn't lose Vox too.

"Sweet fawn," purred The Voice. "So afraid. So confused. Tell me what's on your mind, little one?"

He bared his teeth at the ceiling and stalked towards the door, but gagged as a chain appeared at his throat and dragged him into a bookcase. He grimaced as his spine hit a shelf and the chain yanked again, strangling him as he was forced onto the floor.

“I saw the way you looked at him in his office.” She sounded as though she was smiling, wherever she was. “The way you touched him so curiously, so tenderly. He was enjoying it. So were you.”

Alastor grit his teeth and tried to stand, but the chain tugged him down again and he coughed violently.

“Is that what you want? Do you want him to be yours? Do you want to feel his body beneath you? Do you want him to kiss you? To see if his lips are as soft as a woman’s? To see if his hands are as gentle? Do you want to please him? *Submit* to him? Put your mouth around his fat cock-”

“Enough!” Alastor snarled, fingernails digging into the floorboards through his gloves. “The very idea fills me with *disgust*. I will *never* want him in that way. I will never feel any sort of attraction to him and he can’t be allowed to love me, because-”

Shit.

Alastor fell silent. He had revealed far too much.

The Voice began to laugh...

...And laugh...

...And laugh.

When her laughter faded, Alastor swallowed and steeled himself, subtly testing the chain to no avail. He was stuck.

“My sweet fawn,” she cooed. “Of *course* he loves you. He admires you, respects you. He thinks you’re a strong and respectable Overlord. He doesn’t know your filthy secrets. He doesn’t know what you let those men do to you. He doesn’t know how weak you are, how cowardly. He doesn’t know that you sold your soul out of fear.”

Alastor shook his head slowly. “I didn’t *let* them-”

“He doesn’t know how you kneeled in the dirt for them. He doesn’t know how you let them touch you for *hours*. He doesn’t know how you cried and whimpered for them, how you took them into your mouth. He doesn’t know how much you trembled as they came down your throat. He doesn’t know that you took two of their cocks at once, panting and sweating.”

“Stop,” Alastor whispered, pupils flickering to dials as he pushed his back against the bookcase.

“He doesn’t know how they made you bleed. He doesn’t know how you let them spit and urinate on you, *inside* you. He doesn’t know about the failed attempts to escape, how they easily dragged you back, how one of them seated you on his cock, hand wrapped around your slender neck, choking you as another man played with you, stroked you to completion. You came, so you must have enjoyed it a little...”

Alastor squeezed his eyes shut, trembling, trying to force the memories out of his mind as he drew his knees to his chest. “No,” he growled.

“They liked you being so submissive. They liked that you were so pathetic. They had so much fun, all those hours of entertainment after putting a bullet between your mother’s pretty eyes... But then your father came and he was so *disgusted*, wasn’t he? You ran away like a frightened fawn and your cowardice got him killed.”

Alastor dug his fingers into his legs. That wasn’t- She was twisting everything-

“Do you think Vox would still love you if he knew? Do you think he would still look at you with that lovesick smile if he knew how filthy and disgusting you are? How tainted you are? How *perverted* you are? Or do you think he would walk away like everyone else did, like any normal person *should*?”

Alastor buried his face into his knees, uncaring of his shadow sliding out of its cage as shame and humiliation burned in his gut.

“No one could love you, Alastor. Not if they knew what you were hiding. Not if they knew how damaged and broken you are. And if Vox ever found out about our deal? How *stupid* and naive you were to get a chain locked around your neck? He would never respect you again, little fawn.”

There was a sickening *crack* as Alastor’s silhouette laid into Larien’s unmoving body.

Alastor felt numb.

Empty.

She was right. He *was* broken. Dirty. Stupid. Cowardly. He couldn’t even stop his own shadow from attacking him.

If Vox ever found out what Alastor had done, what he had let those men do, how he came over their fingers even as they overpowered and abused him... It was vile. *He* was vile.

“That silhouette is everything that is wrong with you,” whispered The Voice. “All the weakness and cowardice and perversion and *filth* that lives in your heart and mind. If you want to keep your secrets hidden, to keep Hell from knowing your sins, show that shadow who’s in control.”

Alastor cast the silhouette a hateful glare and held up a hand. Shadows raced towards it, curling around its wrists and ankles before dragging it away from Larien and hurling it into the wall opposite Alastor.

It blinked at Alastor in surprise, the outline of its ears falling as it noticed the look Alastor was throwing it. Suddenly, it snarled and lunged for Alastor, but the shadows pinned it down again and Alastor grit his teeth and ordered more shadows to strike it, to whip its face and tear at its body and batter it until it was a shaking mess of holes, its wounds leaking oily darkness. The corners of its mouth tugged downwards, hissing at Alastor as he stood and approached it.

He stared at its frowning mouth, jealousy pooling in his gut as the stitches holding his smile in place pulled a fraction tighter. He touched the corners of his lips then snarled and allowed his body to stretch and twist, antlers growing, sharpening, and fingers becoming talon-like.

He glowered at the pitiful silhouette as it shrunk away from him, trembling.

Useless coward, he thought viciously. *Vile, filthy, repulsive creature.*

He imagined a familiar axe, felt the weight of it in his empty hands. The silhouette stared up at him in fear before struggling desperately against its shadowy restraints.

With a wicked smile, Alastor dealt the first blow.

Alastor staggered out of the bookshop feeling hollow and exhausted.

At least his silhouette wouldn't escape its prison for a while.

“Alastor?”

He startled and whirled around to face Vox, who looked more and more concerned the longer he stared at Alastor. Vox's gaze flicked quickly to the bookshop before he frowned. "Are you... all right?"

"Peachy," drawled Alastor, sliding his mask back into place. A mask that Vox apparently saw through instantly.

"You look like shit," Vox deadpanned and Alastor grimaced. He decided to change the subject.

"Why are you out here this late, Picturebox?"

Vox glanced at the bookshop again and immediately, Alastor knew something was wrong. He tensed when he saw the calculating look in Vox's eyes, the lie he quickly tried to scrape together.

"Wanted to take a walk, clear my head," Vox said with a shrug. "This street is pretty quiet even during daylight - I figured I wouldn't be bothered by anyone."

Alastor narrowed his eyes and Vox met his gaze, lifting his head ever-so-slightly in an act of defiance.

For a moment, neither of them spoke, each sizing the other up before Alastor grit his teeth.

"How much did you see?"

Vox scowled. "All of it."

Alastor clenched his fists, shoulders so tense that his neck began to ache.

Vox pulled a face. “Couldn’t *hear* anything. Couldn’t see who you were talking to.”

Small mercies. Alastor glowered at Vox. “Why did you follow me?” His voice filters flicked on with his rising fury.

Here, Vox dropped his gaze sheepishly. “It was, uh... accidental. I was walking home when I caught you heading towards Larien’s apartment block.” He scratched the back of his neck. “I figured you were gonna beat the crap out of him and I... uh...” His screen tinged pink and Alastor raised his eyebrows.

Vox gave a half-hearted smirk. “Well, I mean... I wasn’t *disappointed*, was I?” His smirk faded into a frown. “But then you picked up his unconscious body and dragged him here.” He gestured to the bookshop. “I got curious. Wanted to take a peek.”

Anxiety lapped at Alastor’s chest. “So you decided to *spy* on me?” he growled.

“What’s in that bookshop, Alastor?” Vox demanded, gaze hard. “Who were you talking to? Why won’t you let me go inside?”

Alastor’s defences rose again, smile sharpening as he desperately tried to push Vox away, to protect him from Alastor’s mess and the very real danger of the monster in the bookshop.

“Because I don’t trust you,” he hissed, antlers elongating of their own accord. “Because you’ll screw everything up for me. Because you think you’re cleverer than you are.” *Because I can’t lose you too.*

“Bullshit,” Vox snarled, prowling towards Alastor, static heavy in the air and voice filters kicking in. He was upset, Alastor realised with a start. Why was he upset? “Why are you lying to me? Why can’t you just let me in?”

Because I can't handle you turning your back on me in disgust.

He laughed coldly, the dials in his eyes flickering wildly. "This is *Hell*, Vox. Stop being so naive. Honesty and emotion are vulnerabilities down here - they make you *weak*."

"You were having a mental breakdown in there!" Vox roared, gesturing to the bookshop, and Alastor recoiled with bared teeth even as his heart beat in double time.

Vox had *seen*. He had seen Alastor's weakness, his trauma, his *fear*. He had seen everything even if he couldn't hear the words. Had The Voice known he was watching? Had she wanted to humiliate Alastor even further? Destroy any respect Vox held for him?

Damn it! Vox would leave him, sneer at him in repulsion, make cutting remarks about his fear and fragility and-

"You have a damn chain around your neck!" Vox snapped, throwing his hands up angrily.

Alastor's heart dropped to his feet and bile crawled up his throat. *Shit, shit, shit-*

"And why did you beat the ever-loving *crap* out of your shadow?"

Alastor's eyes widened and he took a step backwards then another. His breaths came faster, heavier, and his radio filters filled the air with white noise. Grief blossomed in his chest, followed by a strange sort of agony that had him clutching where his heart lay, and his tongue seemed paralysed as he stared at Vox's angry expression.

In a moment, it would contort into disdain and he would tell Alastor how pathetic he was, how *broken* he was, and Alastor would never see that adoring smile again, never feel those gentle fingers against his ears, never hear that warm laugh, never experience those fluttery feelings in his chest whenever Vox looked at him with such devotion-

Vox's eyes suddenly bulged and he leapt forwards as Alastor tried to melt into the shadows. He grabbed Alastor's wrist and Alastor stiffened and shoved hard at Vox's chest with flattened ears and a smile that was far too wide.

Suddenly, Alastor's silhouette broke free and lunged at Vox.

...And cowered behind him.

Both Alastor and Vox froze as the battered and bleeding silhouette wrapped its arms around Vox from behind and buried its face into the back of his neck, trembling.

Vox glanced down at the shadowy hands over his chest and stomach before slowly raising his gaze to the stunned Alastor.

"Talk to me," Vox said softly, *desperately*.

Alastor stared at the shaking silhouette, unable to find any words as nausea bubbled low in his gut. He shook his head slowly and Vox's gaze turned pleading.

"Alastor, *please*. Tell me what happened. Tell me what's going on with you. It won't change anything! I just want to help."

Alastor swallowed. He couldn't. It would change *everything*. Vox would... Vox would leave. He shook his head again, eying the shadows between the buildings. He couldn't travel through the darkness when he wasn't whole, when his silhouette wasn't in its cage. He needed it to stop cowering behind Vox...

Vox's static prickled Alastor's skin as the Television Demon's frustrations grew.

"*Talk* to me," Vox begged. "You know I would never turn against you! You know I'll always stay by your side, whatever you're going through! You know I love-"

Their gazes widened in unison as Vox clamped his mouth shut and there was a long moment of silence where Alastor's silhouette seemed to tighten its hold on Vox, almost nuzzling into the back of his neck.

"...Talking to you," Vox finished quietly. "Being friends with you." He looked almost pained.

It was all too much. The emotion, the tension, the silhouette's strange behaviour towards Vox, everything that had happened inside the bookshop... It overwhelmed Alastor and he commanded a shadow to grab his silhouette's ankle and return it to its cage.

The silhouette cried out silently and gripped Vox harder, making him stumble into Alastor with a startled yelp.

Alastor jerked backwards but Vox flicked his confused gaze to the silhouette and it reached for him frantically as it was snatched away and forced onto the floor by more shadows.

Vox's screen brightened before he abruptly pulled Alastor into a hug.

Alastor inhaled sharply, losing control of his shadows as he struggled against Vox's hold, heart racing and static biting at Vox's skin as fear and panic threatened to consume him. He felt his body changing, becoming more monstrous as he snarled, and his claws reached for Vox's back, preparing to inflict as much damage as it would take to get the man away from him, to stop him from *touching* Alastor.

Before his claws could sink through clothes and into flesh, the wounded silhouette grabbed his wrists and hissed at him furiously.

Alastor stared at the silhouette, shocked.

Vox's gentle hands slid around his back, rubbing, soothing. "You're safe, Al," he whispered. "I promise you're safe."

Alastor returned to his normal form and realised he was trembling. One of Vox's hands raised to his flattened ear, petting, massaging, comforting, and Alastor watched as the silhouette slowly released his wrists with a frown.

"You don't have to tell me anything," Vox murmured, cautiously tugging Alastor towards him until they were fully flush with one another, until Alastor could feel the full length of Vox's body pressed against him. He was warm. Firm but not hard. He wasn't *trapping* Alastor, merely holding him securely.

Alastor swallowed and found himself sliding his arms around Vox, hooking his head over his shoulder and listening to him breathe steadily beside his ear.

"Please stay," Vox whispered, fingers curling against Alastor's back. "Please don't push me away."

Shoulders sagging, Alastor frowned and held Vox tighter. Vox had been abandoned time and time again by his family and friends and now Alastor had tried to leave; tried to disappear into the shadows because he couldn't handle his own emotions.

His heart rate slowed and his breaths steadied and his smile softened when Vox's frequency altered, trying to find that perfect harmony as his static turned reassuring and soothing as it skittered over Alastor's skin.

Alastor's eyes slipped shut as he sought out the correct frequency and he blanketed Vox in apologetic and grateful static, smile widening at Vox's breath of relief.

He leaned into Vox's clever fingers as they rubbed his ear.

“I care about you,” Vox murmured. “I don’t care if that makes me less of an Overlord. I don’t care if it makes me weak. I care about you. I’m *worried* about you. You mean a lot to me, Smiles. You’re the only one who stuck around. The only one who gives a shit about me.”

Alastor held Vox tighter, fingers splaying possessively over his back as he listened.

“I wasn’t accusing you of anything,” Vox continued quietly. “I’m not *angry* at you. I... I’m *upset*. I hate seeing you hurt and you... you were hurting in there. I saw your face, saw the way you were protecting yourself...” Vox blew out a heavy breath. “You told me not to step foot in that bookshop. Do you know how hard it was to stop myself? Do you know how hard it was for me to not break that damn window?”

Alastor’s heart fluttered and warmth blossomed in his chest. He inhaled sharply, recognising the feeling. *Crap*.

He watched his silhouette slink forwards and snuggle into Vox’s back, its arms snaking around Vox’s stomach with a silent sigh.

Vox shifted slightly until he could lean their foreheads together. “You have to stop hurting it,” he murmured. “It’s a part of you.”

Alastor’s fingers curled into the back of Vox’s coat. He leaned deeper into Vox’s body, pleased when Vox spread his hand protectively over his lower back. This felt... good. *Safe*.

Because Vox *knew*. He didn’t know the details, but he knew about Alastor’s chain and he had seen his fear and anxiety and he had seen him take his frustrations out on his shadow... and he was *still here*. Holding Alastor. Reassuring him. Even protecting *his silhouette*.

The silhouette nuzzled into Vox’s back and Vox huffed softly in amusement.

“So, you can be nice,” he said and Alastor realised he was talking to the shadow.

In response, the silhouette poked playfully at one of Vox's antennae and both demons blinked at each other in surprise.

"Can you... understand me?" Vox asked quietly and the silhouette pulled away and tilted its head for a moment before nodding.

Vox and Alastor stared at each other, bewildered.

"I thought... I thought you only understood Alastor," Vox said, petting Alastor's ear idly.

The silhouette smiled, seemingly amused, and shook its head.

"Then why are you so feral all the time?" Alastor growled and the silhouette scowled at him, hissing silently.

Vox glanced between Alastor and his silhouette before turning his attention to the shadow once more. "Are you part of his emotions?" he asked and Alastor almost rolled his eyes at the excitement in his voice.

The silhouette nodded, gaze softening.

"The bad parts," Alastor muttered, receiving another silent snarl.

Vox shot him a reproachful look before flicking his gaze to the silhouette again. "You appear when he's stressed. Is that what you're made of? His stress?"

The silhouette pulled a face and Alastor watched it curiously. Its gaze was hard and cold when it looked at him, but soft when it looked at Vox. It seemed to like the Television Demon.

“What are you made of?” Vox asked.

The silhouette hesitated then placed a hand over its chest. Vox frowned in confusion and the silhouette’s shoulders slumped a little before it tapped its head twice then placed a hand over its chest again.

Vox shook his head, not understanding.

The silhouette frowned and pointed at Alastor before shaking its head in frustration and sliding towards them both. It poked Alastor’s head and chest in quick succession then hid behind Vox warily.

Alastor narrowed his eyes at it as Vox shrugged helplessly. “I don’t understand,” he said apologetically and the silhouette pouted.

“It’s everything,” Alastor grumbled, averting his gaze. “It’s trying to say it comes from all of my emotions and thoughts. It *escapes* when I’m stressed.”

The silhouette frowned and shook its head and rotated its wrist as though holding something.

Alastor scowled in confusion. “I unlock the cage when I’m stressed?”

The silhouette nodded, glancing curiously at Vox’s antennae and poking one again. Vox chuckled and the silhouette smiled.

Alastor watched them carefully. “Why would I let you out when I’m stressed?”

The silhouette shrugged and slid a finger down an antenna, smiling when it sparked.

“If you’re part of my emotions, why do you attack me?” Alastor asked, holding Vox a little tighter. “I’m rather certain I don’t want to *maim* myself.”

The silhouette paused and gave Alastor a pointed look and Alastor’s breath hitched, body bristling.

“Get back in your cage,” he growled.

The silhouette stiffened and snarled at Alastor, then curled a possessive hand around Vox’s shoulder.

Jealousy pooled in Alastor’s stomach and he summoned shadows to peel the silhouette away from Vox, but was stopped when Vox placed a gentle hand on his chest.

“Al, stop. If you hurt it, you’re only hurting yourself. You’re literally fighting with your own thoughts and emotions.”

The silhouette nodded, squeezing both of Vox’s shoulders before *sticking its tongue out*.

Right, you little shit-

His shadows reared above him like horses.

“Alastor,” Vox said in exasperation as his fingers slid away from Alastor’s ear to tangle in his hair, petting his head so tenderly.

Alastor’s heart thundered in his chest.

The silhouette melted against Vox with a gooey smile.

Alastor's eyes widened.

Oh shit.

The silhouette was a manifestation of *all* of his feelings. It liked Vox because *he* liked Vox. It was soft with Vox because Vox was being soft with Alastor. It hissed and snarled at Alastor because Alastor was at war with himself over his past. It attacked him because he was ashamed of himself, angry at himself, disgusted by himself, etcetera, etcetera.

And *now* it was rubbing itself all over Vox like a love-sick puppy.

...Because Alastor's heart was skipping beats and he felt all warm and fuzzy.

Vox was smart. He would catch on quickly.

Vox *couldn't* know. He didn't have all the details, he didn't know how vile Alastor was, he didn't know what Alastor had let those men do to him, he didn't know how cowardly Alastor was, he didn't know-

The silhouette was getting angry. It snarled and hissed at Alastor and Vox glanced between them both in alarm before pressing his forehead against Alastor's and pulsing a burst of reassuring static between them.

Alastor's pulse stuttered. He briefly wondered if Vox's lips were soft.

He inhaled sharply.

He tore himself from Vox's grip, commanded two shadows to grab his silhouette, hurled it into its cage, and then quickly dodged Vox's outstretched fingers before melting into the shadows.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Discussions of rape

Smooth recovery, Vox ;) And Alastor... I think you might be starting to give the game away, buddy...

Chapter 10: Time Flies When You're Having Fun

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Vox knocked three times on Alastor's door and waited. After thirty seconds, he knocked again.

When the door remained firmly shut, he glared at the peephole in the centre of the panelling and knocked a little harder. "Come on, Alastor. It's been two weeks. You can't ignore me forever."

He was met with silence and he sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. "I know you're in there. I can feel your static."

Again no response. Vox rolled his eyes and leaned casually against the door. "Look, if us talking about our *feelings* made you sprout a set of wings and a halo, I want to see them."

The silence was becoming quite tedious and Vox cut the door an irritated glare. "Help," he deadpanned. "I'm being stabbed in the back in the middle of the street. There's blood everywhere. If only there were a Radio Demon here to save me."

Movement behind the door, yet it still didn't open. Vox pushed himself off the wood and pursed his lips. "I brought you fresh venison."

The locks clicked and the door swung open. Alastor offered him a tight smile before whirling around and stalking deeper into the house. Vox followed after him, shutting the door and dropping the bag of lean venison on the kitchen counter before leaning against the cupboards with a frown as Alastor set about making a pot of tea.

"Radiosilence for two weeks," Vox said, unable to keep the hurt from his voice as Alastor refused to look at him. "I *missed* you."

Alastor tensed, back to Vox as he placed the pot on the stove. Vox scowled. "So, what? We're not going to talk about it? We're not going to talk about the chain around your neck, or the thing in the bookshop, or your shadow, or-"

"No."

Vox straightened, scowl deepening. "Why not?"

"Because it's none of your business," Alastor said sharply, still refusing to meet Vox's gaze.

"What is your problem?" Vox asked angrily. "I've already told you; it doesn't change anything between us. Why are you so determined to shut me out? Why do you keep running away from me?"

Alastor poured the tea, ears low and a strained smile in place. He said nothing and Vox felt his own frustration rising.

"Can we at least talk about the breakthrough with your shadow? That's the first time I've ever seen it calm."

Alastor passed a cup of tea to Vox - two sugars, the way he liked it. He leaned against the cupboards on the opposite side of the room to Vox, gaze on the window and still refusing to look at Vox. Vox's chest stung.

"Have you at least tried talking to it? Tried to work out how to keep it calm?"

Alastor continued to stare through the window. "No."

Vox observed Alastor for a moment, heart sinking. Alastor was pulling away from him because he had seen more than the Radio Demon was willing to show him. The bookshop,

the chain, the shadow, amongst other things... Things that made a dangerous sort of hope swell in Vox's chest.

Vox wasn't stupid. With Alastor avoiding him, he'd had time to think. Time to piece things together.

Wounded and in pain, Alastor's shadow had sought Vox out for protection. It had cowered behind Vox, clung to him, nuzzled into his neck so sweetly. It trusted Vox. It *liked* Vox. And the silhouette was a direct visualisation of Alastor's feelings, meaning that somewhere deep inside that stone-faced facade, Alastor was *hurting* and wanted Vox to help. *Trusted* Vox to protect him from whatever monster was in that bookshop, whatever had tied that chain around his throat.

Alastor might be good at masking his feelings, but his shadow wasn't.

"Can I try?"

Finally, Alastor fixed him with a frown. "Excuse me?"

"Your shadow. Can I try talking to it?" Vox asked, trying to appear as nonchalant as possible. He had to see if he could help Alastor, even if he didn't know what he was helping him through.

Alastor narrowed his eyes. "No."

Vox's shoulders hunched. "Why not? Keeping it locked up is only going to make it angrier. If you have suppressed emotions and they're causing you to be at war with yourself, at war with your own silhouette, then you need to--"

Alastor placed his tea delicately on the counter. "*This* is why I didn't contact you," he said pleasantly, smile a little too wide. "I don't need you meddling in my affairs, Vox, trying to 'fix' something you don't understand."

Vox's heart ached. "I just want to help."

"I don't want your help."

Vox's chest tightened even as anger simmered low in his gut. Fine. Alastor wanted to play this game, so be it. Vox could be just as nasty.

"I'm not stupid, you know," he said coldly. "Do you think I don't notice the way you look at me sometimes? The soft smiles, the affectionate gazes? Do you think I don't notice how you lean into my hand when I pet your ears? Do you think I don't notice how possessive you get over me?"

Alastor went ramrod straight, ears flat and smile more of a snarl as his knuckles turned white from how hard he clenched the counter top. Vox stalked slowly towards him.

"Do you think I didn't notice how you curled your fingers into my coat that night? Do you think I didn't notice how you cradled my head in my office? How tenderly you caressed my face?" He smiled bitterly. "There's only so many times I can ignore all that. Only so many times I can tell myself you're just being a good *friend*."

Alastor's eyes were wide, teeth bared, and antlers growing. Static lay heavy in the air and Alastor pinned himself against the cupboards, gaze flicking to the door every few seconds like a fearful animal. Like prey facing a ruthless predator.

"And the way your shadow latched onto me? *Nuzzled* into my neck?" Vox scoffed bitterly, coming to stand a couple of feet away from Alastor. "I know you're attracted to me. I'm attracted to you too."

Alastor *snarled*, radio filters flicking on, and his silhouette came to life behind him, equally as vicious. It loomed over Vox, claws outstretched, for once matching Alastor's emotions.

“You presumptuous, arrogant, perverted little-”

“I also know that you’ll never want anything more with me,” sighed Vox. “And that I should never ask you for it.”

Alastor hesitated and his shadow shrunk to a more acceptable size, looking confused.

Vox glanced between Alastor and his silhouette with a sad smile. “I get it, y’know? You face enough shit and you start looking for comfort in the least likely places. The more people that reject you, the less picky you become about the type of comfort. I wasn’t hugged enough by mommy and daddy as a kid and now I get into bed with strangers and ask them to smack me around a little, just so I can look at the bruises the next day and see that someone *wanted* to touch me.”

Alastor frowned and Vox pushed through despite the red flush of humiliation creeping up his neck and tinting his screen pink. “And then there’s whatever’s going on with you. You *hate* being touched and everyone flees at the sight of you, so you’re lonely. You’ve got a shadow that you don’t get along with, whatever mess is going on in that bookshop, a chain around your neck, and it’s all become a little bit too much.”

Vox’s shoulders slumped. “You don’t really want me. I’m just convenient because I stuck around and don’t know when to quit. You’re fixating on me because you’re desperate enough for comfort that you’ll do anything to get it... including convince yourself that you’re attracted to another man. Anything to stay grounded, to not be drowned by the messed-up shit inside your head.”

Vox couldn’t hold Alastor’s gaze for much longer, so he lowered it and wrapped his arms around himself in a mixture of embarrassment and need for reassurance. “I see the panic in you every time I touch you. The internal struggle you go through each time I get close. I’ve seen the fear in your eyes, the fear in your shadow when I push just a little too hard... I get it. I know how confusing it can be. I don’t really want to leave someone’s bed with broken fingers or a smashed screen or my thighs so torn up I can barely walk, but at least I know they wanted to touch me. At least they weren’t repulsed by me, right?”

He gestured between himself and Alastor. “It’s, uh... it’s the same thing. You don’t really want to be touched by another guy, but it’s the only option available so you’ll take it. The

least I can do is make sure it doesn't *hurt*. " Which was more than anyone had ever done for him.

A tense silence settled over the room and Vox risked a glance at Alastor, whose gaze was hard and smile closed-lipped. Vox flicked his attention up to the shadow and found it staring at Vox sadly, the corners of its mouth pulling downwards.

Somehow, Vox managed a small smile. "I have a big, fat crush on you, Alastor, and it's nothing to do with not getting enough hugs as a child - I just *like* you. But I would *never* act on it because not only have you made it clear that you aren't interested in men, or any sort of romantic relationship in general, you have enough crap of your own to deal with without worrying about someone else."

Alastor raised his eyebrows and the shadow reached for Vox before retracting its hand. Vox's smile grew bittersweet.

"I can get over you if it means I get to keep you in my life. I want you, but not if it means making you uncomfortable, not if it means *taking advantage* of you."

He watched the fear and panic fade from Alastor's eyes as he unclenched his fingers from around the counter edge. The shadow glanced between them both and Vox steeled himself for whatever would come out of Alastor's mouth next.

"...How on *Earth* did you end up in Hell?" Alastor asked quietly and Vox blinked before barking out a laugh, muscles relaxing as relief blossomed in his chest.

"I am, actually, quite an asshole," Vox grinned. "I'm just less of an asshole around people I like."

Alastor raked his gaze over Vox for a moment, still looking a little uncertain, so Vox held his hands up.

“Look, we’re both mature adults. I can get over a simple one-sided crush with a little time. I’ll never ask for anything more than your friendship. I won’t ask about the chain or the bookshop, because you’re entitled to your secrets, but...” He fixed Alastor and his shadow with a stern look. “I want to see you two work things out. No more fighting, no more trying to kill each other. It isn’t healthy. You’re the same damn person.” Vox paused. “...Sort of.”

Alastor tilted his head in amusement as the silhouette smiled wide and suddenly appeared behind Vox and began peeling him out of his coat. Vox glanced at it in surprise before raising an eyebrow at Alastor, who smiled lazily at him.

“Apparently, I would like you to stay for lunch.”

Vox beamed.

Surprisingly, or perhaps unsurprisingly, Vox stuck to his word. He never asked questions about Alastor’s chain, didn’t push for more information about the bookshop, and although his flirting became utterly obscene and obnoxious, it was also rather entertaining because Vox didn’t *expect* anything to come of it. He seemed genuinely pleased by the exasperated irritation in Alastor’s responses, and even more delighted when Alastor chose to *flirt back*, however rare those occasions were.

Alastor felt... comfortable.

Secure.

It was a strange feeling - the relief and fondness that settled low in his gut whenever Vox walked into the room. The day’s tension rolled off his shoulders whenever Vox made an appearance, to be replaced by reassurance and the warm familiarity that accompanied a solid friendship.

It was obvious that Vox's crush on him wasn't going to fade any time soon - and Alastor often questioned whether Vox might have downplayed the nature of his feelings - but the Television Demon did get better at *hiding* his soft looks and gooey smiles, which Alastor was simultaneously grateful for and perhaps a little melancholic over.

However, with their Big Feelings out in the open, their relationship became somehow lighter, filled with teasing and sarcasm and a certain sense of confidence in each other. Trust thrived between them and Vox lovingly forced him to confront his silhouette, to figure out how it worked, to figure out how to calm it, and how to coax it into dormancy without beating it into submission.

Vox was *respectful*. He heeded Alastor's boundaries, catered to his wants and needs, helped him learn how to accept touch without pushing him too far past his limits, and soon, Alastor was helping Vox to gain power, cutting deals here and there, ringing in favours, finding ways for Vox to achieve his ambitions.

And Vox - lovely, appreciative, *considerate* Vox - never once took advantage of Alastor's generosity. Vox dragged Alastor with him for the ride and although Alastor was happy to stick to the shadows and stay out of the limelight, Vox made sure to include him, always returning to Alastor with a bright smile and joke on his tongue at the end of the day. It served to show how different Vox was to other Overlords, how *special* he was. He didn't let the power go to his head, didn't use Alastor and leave him behind once his power grew. He didn't get greedy, didn't turn on Alastor and try to steal from him like most Overlords would have.

Vox even managed to repair his splintering relationship with Rosie, which was... well. Vox really was quite wonderful, wasn't he? Alastor thought Rosie was pulling away from him because of what had happened to him. He was so conditioned to assume that everyone who learned about his past would be repulsed by him and abandon him, that he hadn't once stopped to think about how it might be his reputation for making Overlords *vanish* that was making Rosie wary of him.

He and Rosie had talked alone one afternoon over tea, after Vox had made the offhand comment that sparked the realisation. Whilst he couldn't tell her the full nature of his deal, he had assured her that she was on a 'protected list' of sorts, alongside Vox, and like Vox she recognised that the subject made him uncomfortable and didn't pry too much.

Twenty years passed, which in the grand scheme of *eternity*, wasn't really all that long, but they were the best years that Alastor had experienced since *expiring*.

However, after so many years, Alastor reluctantly had to accept that Vox's speech in his kitchen all that time ago might have been *slightly* off the mark.

Alastor had never been attracted to men. In fact, even now he was physically nauseated by the idea of another man touching him, kissing him, gazing upon him lustfully...

But there was *one* exception.

And it had nothing to do with a lack of options, or a desperation for any sort of comfort, or whatever else Vox had dismissed it as.

Alastor wasn't stupid. He was pretty certain that a crush stopped being a 'crush' if a terrible day could turn into a good one just by glimpsing your favourite person's face on the television.

He was pretty certain that his crush stopped being a crush when he gave Vox a spare key to his house, but he wasn't one to split hairs.

It was a pity that he would never be able to give Vox what he wanted. Unfortunately, Vox required a special flavour of *touch* from a romantic partner that Alastor couldn't offer him - not after everything he had been through. He didn't know the first thing about navigating a relationship with a man and Vox was right - he had enough complications in his life already without trying to figure out how to not *vomit* when taking his clothes off for another man. He wouldn't even be able to kiss Vox without remembering the way those *monsters* forced his mouth open and-

Well. It just wasn't practical, was it? And if they initiated any sort of romantic relationship, Vox might want to know more about his deal and the bookshop and his past, and it would be *agony* if Vox turned away from him in disgust. Alastor would feel utterly wrecked if twenty years of friendship were flushed down the drain.

No, that simply wasn't allowed to happen. Alastor could keep his feelings to himself, just as Vox did. It was a funny sort of dance, especially in the moments where the line got a little grey and blurry and they recognised *each other's* longing. How easy it would be for one of them to tip over that line...

Miraculously, thankfully, it never happened. Vox was too damn respectful and Alastor had no desire to disappoint Vox with everything he *couldn't* give. Vox deserved better. Better than Alastor, at least, damaged and soiled as he was.

Still, Alastor was happy to give anything he could to Vox, even if it tested his limits sometimes. It would never be enough, but Vox was always so *grateful* anyway.

They strolled along the canal, relishing the quiet that dusk brought - the short period between where the working sinners went home for dinner, and the creeps and freaks of Hell started to crawl out of the gutters and into the shadows of the night.

They talked about music, as they often did, and about the latest trends in dancing. Hell didn't progress quite as fast as Earth but music and technology changed all the time.

Vox had created a new head for himself to fit the advances - still a picturebox, but slightly less bulky than his previous one. The casing bore a wood-effect, which was different but not at all unpleasant on the eye.

Suddenly, Vox smiled deviously and a piece of music with a strong string section and a vivacious rhythm trickled out of his speakers. Alastor laughed delightedly as Vox whisked him into an Argentine Tango, mimicking the 'sultry' expressions of the ridiculous sinner who had been trying to impress his dance partner at the club earlier.

Vox purposefully misstepped, pretending to trip over his own feet, overstretching, and throwing his leg around ridiculously. Yet he was gracious enough not to allow Alastor to fall even if the sinner from earlier had certainly dropped his partner more than once before she stamped on his toe and stormed off.

Vox dipped Alastor precariously, sloppily enough that for a moment, Alastor genuinely thought he was about to land on the floor, but Vox corrected himself at the last moment with a wicked grin and heaved him upright again.

They were alone beside the canal and Alastor decided to screw with Vox a little because he very much enjoyed doing so and he was pretty certain that Vox enjoyed it too, despite all of his pouting and grumbling. So, when Vox returned him to an upright, following position, Alastor quickly dropped his hand to Vox's lower back and dragged the Television Demon flush against him before taking the lead whilst Vox was still recovering from his surprise.

Vox chuckled and lifted his hand to Alastor's shoulder, their roles reversing effortlessly and suddenly, Vox's steps grew more measured, his rhythm precise as he followed Alastor's cues.

Alastor let him get comfortable, let him settle into the tempo and as the melody reached its final bars, Alastor queued up something similar; Vox's audio gliding seamlessly into Alastor's with the only difference being the crackly effects Alastor layered over the track because he knew it would make Vox's lips twitch with amusement.

They danced and Alastor smirked deviously and herded Vox towards the edge of the canal without the Television Demon suspecting anything. Vox's heel slipped on the rounded edge of the embankment and his eyes blew comically wide as he tipped backwards towards the cold, murky water.

Alastor caught him easily, grin wide and Vox narrowed his gaze.

"One little tug and you're in there with me," Vox threatened and Alastor hummed in amusement and pulled him away from the edge.

"You'd owe me a new coat," Alastor drawled before he pressed up against Vox again and continued their tango.

Vox's hand slid to Alastor's upper back as he tried to gain the lead position again, and their pace stuttered as Alastor refused to follow. Vox splayed his fingers over Alastor's upper back

as he was forced to follow once more and his screen brightened at the challenge when Alastor's smirk grew.

The mood shifted as their dance continued, each step becoming sharper, bolder as they both subtly struggled to take the lead. Alastor's hand slipped to Vox's waist, pulling him a fraction tighter to his body, trapping him into obeying Alastor's cues, and after a moment, Vox smirked and curled his fingers ever-so-slightly against the back of Alastor's coat as he released a steady wave of gentle charge into the Radio Demon's body.

The energy prickled at Alastor's skin, warming up his nervous system and triggering something that might have been his fight-or-flight response. From any other Overlord, Alastor would have taken the gesture to be a *threat*, but from Vox it was a playful challenge.

A challenge Alastor would very much like to *win*.

Vox's breath hitched as a shadow slithered around his middle, somewhat restricting his movements, and when Vox dialled up the current a fraction as it surged through Alastor's nervous system, Alastor allowed another of his shadows to settle around Vox's slender throat.

Vox's screen brightened at the vulnerability of his position and for a smug moment, Alastor thought Vox would back down, but the Television Demon pitched towards him and leaned their foreheads together and Alastor found himself spreading his fingers possessively over Vox's waist.

It was a strange sensation, teetering on the edge of *threat* and *teasing* as Vox kept up the trickle of electricity, sending a steady flow of endorphins through Alastor's body. Alastor let his shadows hang like a warning around Vox's stomach and neck, squeezing lightly when he looked to be relaxing a little too much.

There was a familiar tension to their dance that was by no means unpleasant, and their legs brushed with nearly every step as their moves became more daring, more complicated. Their linked hands released one another and Vox's fingers skittered over Alastor's side in a silent request.

Alastor acquiesced, allowing Vox to spin him and he grinned viciously when Vox's hands landed on his hips, stopping him mid-turn so that his back was to Vox's chest and the Television Demon was leading once more.

Vox's quiet chuckle didn't go unheard.

Vox herded him forwards with every step, one hand sliding over Alastor's stomach and the other over his chest to stop him from spinning around - a dirty tactic that had Alastor's grin widening.

Alastor's fingers skated over Vox's arm as his other hand reached behind him to touch Vox's hip - a cue for Vox to perform a 'sidecars and candlestick' manoeuvre - and Vox fell for the bait, whirling him around and reaching for his hips only for Alastor to hook a leg around Vox's hip and lean backwards, forcing the other Overlord to catch him.

The shadow around Vox's throat uncoiled to make way for Alastor's fingers curling around the back of his neck and Alastor tangled his other hand with Vox's, forcing him backwards as he regained the lead.

Vox grabbed his waist, pulling their bodies flush once more with a soft, frustrated growl that had Alastor smirking triumphantly. Static popped around them and neither was sure who it belonged to.

Their frequencies thrummed together and Vox's electricity increased another notch, stealing Alastor's breath for a moment before he squeezed the back of Vox's neck a little, thumb settling over his quickening pulse as two shadows curled around Vox's upper arms with obvious possessiveness.

Vox's smirk hitched higher and he abruptly twirled Alastor again, but Alastor hooked his leg around Vox's hip once more to stop the spin before Vox could. Vox grinned ruthlessly and slipped his palm beneath Alastor's thigh, preventing him from dropping his leg again and, once more, Vox had the upper hand as he dipped Alastor low and fast.

When they resurfaced, Alastor bounced straight into a ‘koala’ manoeuvre, hoping it would surprise Vox enough for him to falter, but the Television Demon caught him and suspended him around his waist, giving a cheeky spin as he wiggled his eyebrows up at Alastor.

Alastor laughed and Vox put him down, dragging the Radio Demon against him once more as he pressed their heads together, hands settling over Alastor’s hip and upper back. Immediately, Alastor’s fingers splayed over Vox’s lower back as his other hand resumed its position curled around his neck.

He gazed into Vox’s eyes for a moment, smiling at the playful challenge there. There was amusement too, and enjoyment.

There was also adoration and devotion. *Love.*

Love that Vox would never admit to, but both of them knew it was there.

There was probably something similar in Alastor’s gaze if Vox’s softening smile was anything to go by.

The tone shifted, their movements becoming less lively, gentler, tender as the music slowed into a different genre courtesy of Vox’s speakers.

Alastor’s fingers curled possessively into the back of Vox’s coat as Vox’s thumb rubbed affectionate circles into Alastor’s hip. Their tango transitioned into a slow dance and Vox’s eyes slipped shut as he seamlessly gave up control to Alastor, melting against him subtly.

Alastor brushed his thumb over Vox’s pulse point in a silent promise. He might not be able to give Vox *everything* he needed, but he could give him this. He could give him this small amount of affection, show him how grateful he was for Vox getting him to this point, to where he could allow the Television Demon to put his hands all over him without succumbing to defensive panic and unfiltered fear.

The electricity coursing through Alastor became less teasing and more possessive, as though Vox was *marking* him with his energy, blanketing every organ, every nerve, every blood vessel in a mesh of charge, and a soft growl escaped Alastor before he could stop it. His shadows wrapped more securely around Vox, snaking around his arms and legs and middle as though hiding him from prying eyes, keeping him tucked safely against Alastor. Vox released a heavy breath as his hand drifted from Alastor's upper back and into the soft hair at the nape of his neck.

Alastor's heart stuttered.

...Would it be so bad to have this?

He had been so fixated on gender and anatomy, but Vox wasn't just *another man*. Vox was the person who had stuck by his side despite all the secrets. He was the patient soul that showed Alastor how gentle touch could be, how rewarding and comforting it could be. He put up with Alastor's unpredictable shadow and helped to fix his relationship with Rosie.

Vox was healing him, little by little, without knowing what it was that caused the damage.

And Alastor wanted to return the favour. He wanted to help Vox understand that there was nothing wrong with him, that there was nothing repulsive about the Television Demon or his body. That he didn't need people to hurt him in the name of being touched. That he wasn't worthless or pathetic just because he craved affection.

Alastor had been so focused on what he *couldn't* give Vox, that he hadn't stopped to think about what he *could* offer.

...Perhaps, with time, Alastor could even learn how to be intimate with another man. Vox certainly seemed capable of teaching him and he knew he was *safe* with his Television Demon.

Vox would never ask for anything more from him, so it was up to Alastor to cross over the line.

He swallowed. He needed to think about this when he wasn't wrapped up in Vox's embrace. He needed to go over the details carefully and with a clear head. He needed to make sure he was *ready* for a brand new sort of relationship before he jumped into it. He had no intention of hurting Vox so he needed to be certain that it was something he wanted; a challenge he was ready to face.

Suddenly, Vox made a strangled noise of alarm and Alastor's eyes widened as the other Overlord clutched at him as he jerked backwards. Alastor tried to catch him but the angle was too steep and he stumbled as Vox tightened his grip in panic.

They tumbled into the cold water with a great *splash*.

Alastor resurfaced first, his bangs plastered to his face and his fur slicked down, making him look something akin to a sodden rat.

Vox broke through the filthy water with a gasp, the complex electronics that powered his body thankfully protected by a combination of his own magic and his organic parts. His antennae sparked a little however, and his screen flickered and pixelated as he tipped his head to one side to empty his vents of water. He glanced at Alastor's soggy form and burst into staticky laughter.

Alastor flicked his bangs from his face with narrowed eyes before searching for steps or a ladder that would help them out of the canal.

"You owe me a new coat," huffed Alastor as he swam towards a set of stairs a little further down the embankment.

Vox snickered and swam after him.

You know trouble is about to start when there is a twenty-year time skip ;)

Chapter 11: Addicted To Your Love

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Their dance had been niggling at Vox's subconscious for the past 48 hours with no signs of reprieve.

It wasn't his fault that Alastor was so damn *hot*. Throwing his leg over Vox's hip, shooting him those wicked smirks, coiling his shadows so possessively around Vox like he wanted to *devour* him.

Vox let his head fall into his hands, a soft groan escaping his lips. Then there was the affection in his smiles, the playful teasing, the *love* shining in his eyes...

He was starting to think that his little monologue in Alastor's kitchen might have been wrong - specifically, the bit about Alastor only being attracted to him because he was *convenient*. Vox wasn't sure what it was exactly that Alastor saw in him, but he was starting to realise that the Radio Demon was, in fact, on a subconscious level, very much in love with him.

Which was great! More than great! It was *amazing*.

And irrefutably, horrifically unfair.

Because Vox *wanted*. He wanted Alastor so damn much.

Alastor had been good to him, had nurtured his ambitions and dreams into a reality, had stayed by his side, let Vox touch him despite his aversion and in turn, touched Vox in a way he so desperately craved. Alastor was healing him, little by little, teaching him that he wasn't pathetic or unloveable. Alastor had shown him that he didn't need to limp home early in the morning with bruises and torn flesh and damaged electronics just to prove to himself that other people wanted to touch him; that he was *worthy* of gentleness and kindness despite how others had treated him in life.

He loved Alastor with all of his heart, which was a shocking thing to find in Hell. Obsession and lust were a given, unrequited attraction was commonplace, and sexual sadism was another way to torture sinners in this place of eternal damnation, but mutual love? Trust? The warm contentment that settled low in Vox's stomach and radiated up to his chest and into his fluttering heart whenever he so much as *thought* about the way Alastor smiled at him?

Those sorts of feelings were rarer than pink diamonds.

Vox would march up to Alastor right now and grab him by the hips and plant a firm kiss on those smiling lips if he thought Alastor would welcome it. He would blurt out a pathetic confession of love and pull Alastor into a hug and rub his ears and tell him how devoted he was to the Radio Demon, how he was a beautiful, bright sun in Vox's dark afterlife, how he wanted to spend the rest of eternity wrapped in Alastor's arms... if he thought Alastor could handle any of that.

The truth was that whilst Vox recognised the emotions dancing behind Alastor's gaze, he wasn't sure if Alastor had accepted them yet, and if he ever would. A supposedly straight man working out that he might have strong feelings for another man was a feat in of itself, and a demon Overlord figuring out that he had gooey affection for another demon Overlord was perhaps even more difficult, but Alastor also had the chain around his throat, the thing in the bookshop, and his unpredictable shadow to contend with.

It was a lot... even for someone as strong willed and impressive as Alastor. It wasn't fair for Vox to shove his own feelings in Alastor's face, to demand more of him when he was already facing far too much. Alastor wasn't ready and perhaps he never would be, and that was ok. Vox had *promised* never to ask for more than friendship and he would stand by that promise, because Alastor meant everything to him and then some. His job was to support Alastor, not pile on more insecurities and problems and stress.

He was just happy to have Alastor in his life, fond smiles and warm gazes included. It was enough. More than enough.

Unfortunately, not being able to *have* Alastor was also extremely frustrating. Especially when the Radio Demon teased and challenged him like he had beside the canal, riling Vox up with his elegant, masterful dancing and plucking on his heartstrings like they were a double bass,

until Vox wanted to fall to his knees and worship Alastor with whispered praises and devoted kisses.

Damn, he was pathetic.

He stared miserably into his whisky.

“My, my... What has someone so handsome got to be sour about?”

There was a light accent, quite pleasant, and Vox glanced to his right to find a towering moth-demon, with stunning wings and long legs and a wicked smile and- *hello gorgeous*.

Oh, this was exactly the sort of pick-me-up he needed. No-strings-attached one-night fling with this *huge* specimen. He even had two fluffy, striped antennae. He could definitely run his fingers through those, pet them a little, see how sensitive they were...

He plastered on a charming smile, eyes going half-lidded. “Well, I *was* having a bad day, but now my evening is looking a little more promising.”

The moth-demon’s smirk widened and he placed a hand - *shit*, those were long fingers - on the stool next to Vox. “Is this seat taken?”

“I’d let you have it even if it was,” purred Vox. “May I buy you a drink, Mr...?”

“Valentino. And you may. A glass of Merlot, if you will.”

Vox gestured the bartender over and ordered the drink before side-eying Valentino. “A man of taste, I see.” The white ruff around Valentino’s neck looked very plush and Vox hoped that it was a part of his body. He very much wanted to tangle his fingers in it, find out if it was as soft as Alastor’s hair or ears.

“Yes,” agreed Valentino before his smirk turned deadly as he raked his gaze over Vox’s body. “And you’re looking positively *delicious*, mi amor.”

Vox felt his own grin growing as he held a hand out. Vox wasn’t the most powerful Overlord around but it had been a long while since anyone had been so bold without him initiating the conversation first. “Vox,” he introduced.

Valentino took it and brought Vox’s knuckles to his lips and Vox’s screen tinted pink. “Oh, I’m quite aware of who *you* are, Television Demon. Did you know your voice is far more alluring when you aren’t on camera?”

Vox hadn’t noticed the second set of arms the first time around but that... that was definitely a turn-on. He could work with that very nicely. “You like my voice?” he purred, tone dropping deeper, more sensual.

Valentino’s fingers curled delicately around the wine glass that slid in front of him and it was an *obscene* gesture, clearly having underlying implications, and Vox swallowed, mind going blank for a moment as Valentino hummed in amusement and brought the glass to his lips, flicking his tongue over the rim before taking a sip.

Vox’s fans flipped on.

“Amorcito, you are making this *too easy*, ” whispered Valentino and Vox licked his lips before his brain hooked onto the first word of the sentence. *Amorcito*. It was familiar - a catchphrase of sorts. Finally, his upstairs brain took the lead of his downstairs one.

“Wait, *Valentino*?” Vox said, frowning. “As in... the porn director?”

“So, you have heard of me,” Valentino drawled, smile sharpening a fraction. “I was starting to get disheartened.”

Vox leaned back in his seat a little, raking his gaze over Valentino's partially-open black shirt, the flared white trousers, and shiny black heeled boots. He looked like a film director.

"You're an Overlord who's making a name for himself in the entertainment industry. Of course I've heard of you," Vox said, suddenly wary. Valentino didn't come anywhere close to his level of power, but Vox had learned not to underestimate others. Sometimes surprise alone was enough to give an opponent the upper hand, as he had learned a few years ago when he had mocked a small-time Overlord for trying to challenge him, only to learn that her power was frequency manipulation and she managed to simultaneously deafen him and make him crash long enough to lay into his body with a *hacksaw*.

Fortunately, Alastor had been passing by and pushed through the cheering crowd and began the meticulous process of tearing the Overlord into tiny strips of flesh and muscle, which he later fried and *ate*.

To be honest, Vox was accustomed to Alastor's weird eating habits now. He still consumed normal foods, but occasionally he would indulge in something a little more exotic - usually courtesy of Rosie, but sometimes because some unlucky sinner tested his patience a bit too far - and, don't get Vox wrong, it was very *strange*, but it wasn't the most off-putting thing in Hell, especially when it was already cooked. Sinner meat didn't really look any different to steak once it wasn't attached to a face.

He was getting distracted.

He narrowed his eyes at Valentino. "What do you want?"

Valentino chuckled and stroked a finger over Vox's thigh. "To learn if your bed sheets are silk or cotton."

Vox forcibly removed Valentino's hand from his thigh and dumped it in the moth-demon's lap. "Mhmm, really? So, you're not looking to cut a deal, or ask for a favour, or-" His hand shot out, gripping Valentino's wrist where it lay poised over Vox's glass, ready to tip a tiny vial of glossy red liquid into his whisky.

“Or drug me?” Vox asked around a false smile.

Valentino blinked and tried to retract his hand but Vox held fast, grip tightening enough to bruise.

There was a flash of movement, one of Valentino’s lower arms reaching behind him, and Vox bared his teeth and grabbed Valentino by an antenna and smashed his face into the bar top. The wine glass shattered on the floor and Valentino yelped. Vox leapt off his stool, gripping the arm that had snaked around the moth-demon’s back, and yanking it high enough between his shoulder blades that he groaned with pain. He released Valentino’s antenna in favour of digging his claws into the back of the moth-demon’s bald head and pinning him against the bar.

He glanced down at Valentino’s belt and the sleek pistol wedged there. He tutted.

“At least put it in a holster,” Vox drawled. “You could blow your ass off.”

There was a soft growl from Valentino as Vox pushed his face further into the sticky bar top. No one interrupted them, although a few did openly grin at the scene. Fights were a part of everyday life in Hell.

Valentino abruptly threw out his massive wings, but Vox was quicker and he discharged a burst of electricity through Valentino’s head and wrist. The air smelled of burnt flesh for a moment as Valentino screeched.

Vox leaned closer to Valentino’s twitching antennae. “You might be bigger, but I’ve been down here a lot longer than you, *amorcito*.”

Valentino threw him a filthy look and Vox grinned before snagging the gun from Valentino’s belt and stepping away from him, twirling the weapon around a finger. “I’m keeping this.”

Valentino bounced off his stool and loomed over Vox, all four sets of claws outstretched. Vox wedged the muzzle of the gun against his exposed chest with a bored expression.

“Don’t be stupid,” Vox said, unimpressed, and Valentino froze.

Slowly, Valentino lowered himself onto the stool again and Vox drew the gun away from his chest but kept it in his hand. He had never actually used a gun before and he didn’t really see the point in starting now when he could literally manipulate electricity and kill people that way. Guns were boring. And one could miss their target with a bullet.

He supposed he could gift the weapon to Alastor, but that would probably be akin to gifting a hamster wheel to a duck.

“So, what was your ingenious plan?” Vox asked blandly, gesticulating with the gun. “Drug me enough that I couldn’t fight back and then shoot me and take all my power and souls for yourself?”

Valentino pressed his lips together, frowning and Vox huffed a laugh. “*Wow*. That... That is the dumbest plan I’ve ever heard.” He paused thoughtfully. “Actually, no. That’s not fair. The *dumbest* plan goes to the chick who walked straight up to me in the middle of the street and tried to smash my face in with a hammer. She was dead in, like... three seconds, tops.”

He grinned toothily at Valentino. “Y’know, I was looking to blow off some steam in the bedroom tonight, but *murder* is just as entertaining.” Yeesh, he was even starting to *sound* like Alastor.

He gestured to the door theatrically with the gun. “I’m even kind enough to give you a head start.”

Valentino’s gaze darted between Vox and the door before he cautiously stood. Vox smiled lazily at him. “You should start running.”

Valentino glanced around the bar before taking a step towards the door, then another, before he raced through it. Vox waited five seconds and downed the rest of his drink. Perhaps he could bring Alastor a snack? The moth-demon seemed quite muscular - plenty of meat for Alastor to sink his teeth into.

Vox twirled the gun around his fingers again before handing it to the bartender when he came to collect Vox's empty glass. "Your tip," he said and the bartender took the gun and touched his hat in thanks before immediately shooting a rowdy patron between the eyes.

Vox whistled cheerily to himself as he headed towards the exit, hands in his pockets. He barely made it out of the bar before Valentino ploughed into him and-

Kissed him?

A real French kiss.

Hey, he wasn't a bad kisser either. It was kinda hot the way Valentino had him pinned against the wall.

Ah, wait... wasn't there something important about the porn director's tongue? Hadn't he read it in some crappy magazine whilst waiting for Alastor to finish speaking to his tailor?

His head felt a little fuzzy as something dripped down the back of his throat like honey. It was sweet, a little addictive even.

Venom. That was how Valentino got so popular so quickly, how he gained ownership of so many souls in such a short amount of time. He drugged his pornstars to make them do whatever he wanted, to really push their limits, *and* he made a bit of pocket change by allowing people to suck his tongue for a quick high.

Vox hadn't seen the appeal in being doped up since he was sixteen. Sure, it felt good at first, but the come-down wasn't worth it. And it was so pointlessly expensive for something he

would barely remember afterwards. The high itself was unpredictable - Vox had done all sorts of weird shit when he had been in the clouds as a teenager, including falling asleep in a dumpster and waking up floating in a lake, twenty miles out from where he found the dumpster.

Anyway, the point was he didn't condone recreational drugs, kids.

He bit down on Valentino's tongue.

The moth-demon hissed and jerked backwards before grabbing Vox's wrists and pinning them above his head before using his lower set of claws to pierce Vox's hips. Vox flashed Valentino another grin.

"Hey, wanna see my bug zapper impression?"

Valentino frowned in confusion before screaming as Vox discharged a few hundred volts through him.

The moth-demon collapsed to his knees, sizzling slightly, and Vox cracked his knuckles and rolled his tongue around his mouth curiously. Something trickled down his screen and he brought his fingers to his lips, inspecting the red liquid curiously where it stained his fingers. The same liquid that Valentino had tried to pour into his drink.

He felt pleasantly buzzed. A little horny too, but not overly so. "Hm. Okay, yeah. I see the appeal," Vox commented thoughtfully. "Unethical and absolutely vile the way you use it, but yeah... tastes like maple syrup."

"It changes to suit the preferences of those ingesting it," Valentino panted from the floor, flicking his dark gaze up to Vox.

Vox raised an eyebrow. "Neat. I *do* like maple syrup."

There was a pause.

Suddenly, Valentino pounced upon Vox again, tongue lolling out of his mouth and Vox's hand wrapped around his throat faster than the moth-demon could react. Vox flipped their positions and pinned the much larger demon against the wall by his throat.

"You're not very smart, are you?" Vox drawled. He enjoyed a good hunt. This one wasn't particularly challenging but it was certainly amusing. It was a shame Alastor wasn't here; he would have had such fun teasing the idiotic moth.

Valentino grit his teeth before a wicked smirk swept over his face as his lower set of hands quickly grasped Vox's free arm and he brought it to his mouth before biting hard into Vox's flesh.

Vox's brows furrowed and he sent another blast of charge through the moth-demon. Valentino whimpered and released him.

Vox glanced at the new puncture holes in his palm and knuckles. Shiny red venom merged with trickles of blood.

He felt strange, docile almost, or perhaps merely apathetic. Not too apathetic, mind you, and he balled his injured fist up and rammed it into Valentino's stomach, earning a pained groan.

Suddenly, his emotions shifted into something decidedly less docile and he glanced at the moth-demon in surprise as flames of desire and arousal lapped at his gut. He could feel himself getting hard in his slacks.

Valentino caught his expression and smirked through his own pain. He trailed his fingers down the edge of Vox's screen.

“Kiss me, amorcito,” he purred.

Vox released his throat and snatched Valentino’s hand away from his face with a growl. He considered marching back into the bar and asking the bartender if he could borrow the gun for a couple of minutes.

Uncomfortable and weirdly aroused, Vox stepped away from Valentino and flicked his gaze to the nearest street lamp. He was about to escape into it when Valentino dragged him closer and snaked his arms around him again, shoving his tongue into Vox’s mouth once more. His claws bit into Vox’s back and arm and *ass*, and the effects of his venom grew more potent as it filled Vox’s bloodstream.

He became unbearably hard, aching for someone to touch him, to cool him down, to put their cock in him or let him put his cock in them. Valentino seemed willing. Perhaps Valentino would-

With a snarl, Vox clamped down on Valentino’s tongue.

Valentino *howled* and Vox tore himself from the moth-demon’s grasp and spat out the severed tongue tip. A glance at Valentino’s lower left arm revealed a shard of glass he had plucked from the broken bottle behind his boot.

Vox clenched his fists and shifted his weight, trying to find a comfortable position despite his stiff dick. He couldn’t fight like this and he had no desire to let Valentino get any more venom in him.

He grit his teeth and vanished into the power grid.

He stormed into Alastor’s radio tower, grinding his teeth.

“Asshole,” he hissed, receiving a sharp glare from Alastor as he spoke into his microphone, addressing his listeners. He cocked an eyebrow at Vox’s furious expression and finished up the segment likely earlier than he had intended before starting the music.

He swivelled to face Vox. “My dear, you look rather flustered,” commented Alastor before his gaze was drawn to the obvious strain in Vox’s trousers. His smile faltered, ears lowering slightly.

Vox half-turned away from him (which probably highlighted the problem even further, but it still made Vox feel better to do so) and his screen tinted rose.

Perhaps he should have dealt with the issue at hand before interrupting Alastor’s broadcast in a rage.

“Vox?” Alastor asked softly.

Vox grimaced. “Shit. Sorry, Al. I shouldn’t have barged in like that. I’ll uh... I’ll just-” He turned to the door. Why had he come here again? To the one person in Hell who hated depravity of a sexual nature?

Oh, yeah. Because Alastor’s presence soothed him. Because Alastor made him feel *safe*.

Stupid thing to feel in Hell. Then again, Alastor was good at making him feel stupid things. Good things, though they may be.

“...Did something happen?” Alastor asked. “You have blood trailing from your mouth.”

Vox touched the sticky trail with his fingers and his temper flared.

“Damn moth,” he growled.

“What was that?”

Vox glanced over his shoulder at Alastor and debated with himself over whether he should reveal what had happened. The Radio Demon was usually disgusted by conversation of a sexual nature, so he doubted that his tale of Valentino would be a topic Alastor would want to discuss.

He grimaced at the ache between his legs. He really should have sorted that first. It wasn't going away and he had a sneaky feeling that Valentino's venom was the cause. What an irritating power - everlasting boners. What was the damn point in that?

“Vox, your static will interfere with my equipment if it gets any *livelier*.” His voice softened with concern. “My dear, what's got you so upset?”

Two ‘my dears’ in such a short space of time. Alastor must be really worried about him.

He sighed and turned to Alastor with a scowl. “I, uh... I was at the bar and I met Valentino.”

Alastor tipped his head a little to one side, the name unfamiliar.

“The porn director. The small-time Overlord. The one with the venom.”

Alastor's nose wrinkled in distaste. “Oh. Him.”

“Yeah, him,” grumbled Vox before he nodded down at his *problem* and wiped away the saliva dripping down his screen. “It isn't blood.”

Alastor's eyes widened as his ears lowered even further. “I... see. Well, I don't wish to be rude, but I'd rather not hear about your extracurricular activities-”

“He tried to shoot me, Alastor. I didn’t ask to suck on his tongue, he just shoved it in there.”

Alastor fell silent.

“I fried him and he still came back for more,” Vox griped. “Bit my arm - which stung, by the way - and even after I socked him in the gut, he *still* put his hands on my *ass* and rammed his tongue down my throat.” He gestured to his erection. “And now I’m stuck with this thing and everything feels weird and unfocused and I’m stupidly horny but it’s all *wrong* and- hey, are you okay?”

He frowned at Alastor as the Radio Demon’s grin pulled taut at the edges and his eyes flickered to dials as his antlers grew taller and taller. His silhouette stretched above him, huge and menacing and its face contorted into a sort of feral fury that, quite frankly, made Vox wary.

“Uh... Smiles?”

Charge raced through the mixing desk, blowing every piece of equipment and the ‘on air’ light exploded.

“Where is he?” Alastor asked without moving his mouth, which was actually pretty creepy, even to Vox.

“I, uh... I don’t know,” Vox said carefully, uncertain what was happening. “I bit off his tongue, so he’s probably sorting that?”

Alastor rose from his seat with deadly grace. He collected his cane and smiled at Vox with that eerie grin. “Did he do anything else to you, my dear?” His mouth still wasn’t moving, teeth clenched unnaturally.

“Uh... no?”

“Which bar?”

Vox tentatively told him. The stitches at Alastor’s mouth and the ‘X’ on his forehead shimmered into view.

“I’ll be back shortly. Don’t wander off, now.” He sounded playful. He didn’t *look* playful.

“Hang on a sec, Al-”

He melted into the shadows and his silhouette screeched a silent battle cry as it disappeared with him.

Vox stared at the space Alastor had occupied moments earlier. He shifted his weight uncomfortably and palmed his tented trousers.

He really shouldn’t.

Not in Alastor’s radio tower.

Damn it, but Alastor had asked him to wait here. He really didn’t fancy the Radio Demon seeing him all... excited again.

He plopped onto the floor with a rapidly reddening face and unfastened his belt.

Chapter End Notes

And so the fun begins :)

Chapter 12: A Surprising Rejection

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Alastor materialised in a pool of darkness at the side of the bar. He peered around the corner, keeping himself hidden as he watched a tall moth-demon grumble to himself in frustration, palm clasped over his bloody mouth. His fists were clenched and he looked rather dishevelled, with what appeared to be red wine staining the flared bottoms of his white trousers. He looked to be sporting a couple of burns at the back of his head and a couple of his arms, and the air smelled slightly... smoky.

Alastor's deadly grin crept wider.

Good boy, Vox.

He spotted the severed tongue tip on the floor and pride swelled in his chest. *Very nice, Picturebox.*

Valentino leaned against the wall, still holding his mouth, and his eyes slipped closed, brow creasing with pain. His breathing slowed and his demonic healing abilities kicked in - aided by his Overlord power - and he slowly drew his hand away from his mouth, wiping away the congealed blood at his lips as he did so.

He sighed quietly and whilst his eyes were still shut, Alastor crept along the wall and came to a halt a mere foot away from him.

He liked people to see his smile before he summoned his shadows. He liked to see his victim's eyes widen in fear as they came to the realisation that they were about to die.

He hesitated for a moment, wondering whether he should knock Valentino unconscious and dump his body at the bookshop for The Voice to deal with, but ultimately decided against it. He wanted to be the one to kill Valentino - he wanted to see the light fade from the repulsive moth's eyes. He wanted Valentino to know that targeting Vox had been a personal slight against the Radio Demon. He wanted Valentino to know that Vox was off-limits, that what he had done to the Television Demon was *unacceptable*.

"I've heard you've been sticking your tongue into places where it doesn't belong," Alastor drawled and Valentino startled, skittering away from Alastor with wide eyes and all four arms raised defensively in front of him.

Alastor tilted his head in amusement, relishing the taste of panic for a moment before he drew some real, icy terror out of the vile moth.

Valentino paused, gaze raking over Alastor's frame for a moment before he raised an intrigued eyebrow. "The Radio Demon?" He plastered on a wicked grin, voice dropping into a sultry purr. "My, my. You're a pretty little thing, aren't you?"

Alastor's smile grew strained and his eyes flashed dangerously as his silhouette became animated on the wall of the bar. It looked ready to tear into Valentino but it seemed happy to wait for Alastor's command.

"I take it by knowing me, you also know my reputation for being *territorial*?" Alastor asked sweetly and Valentino frowned, glancing at the bar.

"This is all part of the Entertainment District. If anything, this bar borders the Television Demon's territory."

Alastor chuckled darkly and advanced on the moth-demon, allowing his cane to strike the ground in a slow, steady beat.

“I wasn’t referring to the bar,” Alastor said, amused by how Valentino drew himself to his full height as though trying to intimidate Alastor into backing away. *Brainless insect*. “How’s your tongue?”

“Healing slowly after that stupid *bitch* took a bite out of it-” Valentino cut himself off and stared at Alastor’s devilish grin, and he swallowed, eyes going round. “Uh...”

Alastor commanded two shadows to snake up Valentino’s legs, curling around and around him like a couple of pythons. The moth-demon looked down in alarm and tried to take flight, but Alastor’s silhouette appeared behind him and forced his wings to fold.

“Go on,” Alastor hummed. “You were saying something about a *stupid bitch*?”

Valentino swallowed before he scowled and scraped up a misguided scrap of confidence. “I’ve heard the rumours about you two, everyone has. What are you, his boyfriend or something?”

“Or something,” said Alastor as he flexed his fingers around his cane and wondered which part of Valentino to chop off first. Start with a limb or go straight for the tongue? Decisions, decisions...

Valentino smirked lewdly. “You jealous I got a little taste of your boyfriend, amorcito?”

In all honesty, Alastor was slightly jealous, but that wasn’t the reason he was about to shred Valentino’s wings like lettuce.

“Since you clearly possess all the higher intelligence of an amoeba, I’ll repeat that I am not, as Vox would say, ‘his beau’.”

“Casual lovers?” Valentino purred and Alastor shot him a dry smile. What a dull, disgusting creature.

“You appear to be missing the point,” Alastor said patiently as he ordered more shadows to coil around Valentino’s arms, stretching them wide. “You see, you made Vox quite uncomfortable, so now I’m going to make *you* uncomfortable by testing how many of your limbs I can detach before you bleed to death.”

The smile dropped from Valentino’s face.

“Then again, I don’t want this to be over too quickly,” Alastor drawled as he twirled his cane and tapped Valentino’s bare chest with it. Perhaps I should break all of your fingers first to get myself warmed up? You certainly have an abundance of them!”

He glanced at his silhouette and it grinned manically before digging its claws into Valentino’s wings and violently ripping them from his back. Valentino screamed and Alastor tutted, shaking his head.

“*Fingers*, darling. Not *wings*,” he said mildly before fixing the trembling Valentino with a pleasant smile. “Honestly, I’m trying my hardest to train it but it does get a little carried away in its enthusiasm. No matter, you won’t be needing them for this next part.”

Valentino struggled wildly against the shadows restraining him and Alastor relished his fear for a few moments before wedging the head of his cane under Valentino’s chin until the moth-demon glowered down at him.

“I’m going to teach you the importance of *consent*,” Alastor said lowly as his body shifted and twisted into a more terrifying form.

He loomed over Valentino, gripping his chin between two spindly claws and he opened his mouth, showing off his razor-sharp teeth as he decided that he wanted a bite of Valentino’s left upper arm first.

He jerked in disgust when Valentino *spat into his mouth*.

Valentino bared his teeth at Alastor's shocked expression. "You like that, you filthy whore?" he taunted through the agony of his absent wings.

"You like that, you filthy whore?" asked one of the men as he gripped Alastor's hair painfully tight and thrust mercilessly into his mouth, uncaring when Alastor gagged and choked and struggled for breath. He spat on Alastor's face and some of the saliva landed in his eye.

Behind him, another man's fingers bit into his hips as he grunted like an animal, shoving in and out of Alastor at a ruthless pace. The third man had his hand around his own cock, stroking lazily as he watched Alastor whine and whimper and shake. In his other hand was a lit cigarette, which he took a drag from every so often.

The man behind Alastor groaned when he came, filling Alastor with hot, sticky fluid that made a sob tear out of his throat. The man pulled out of him and suddenly, the third man smirked and stubbed his cigarette out on Alastor's bruised perineum.

A strangled cry forced its way out of Alastor as the burn radiated deeper into the sensitive tissue and the man in front of him grunted and spilled down his throat. He pulled out of Alastor's mouth but kept a firm grip on his face, refusing to allow him to close his lips. He spat onto Alastor's tongue and smacked him hard across the cheek, sending Alastor tumbling onto his side, shaking and crying. He had no idea how long they had kept him here, but it felt like hours.

A boot struck between his legs and he curled in on himself with an agonised whine.

"Filthy little halfbreed," growled one of the men and Alastor begged mindlessly for them to let him go as he was rolled onto his back and pinned down. Another man retrieved a lighter and forced Alastor's thighs apart.

Alastor's back arched off the ground as he howled.

Alastor froze, eyes wide like a deer in headlights as his heart thumped double time and nausea sloshed around his gut. His shadows dissolved into nothing and distantly, he recognised that his silhouette had pinned itself against the wall of the bar, ears low and mouth turned down into an expression that was halfway between terror and rage.

Now unrestrained, Valentino surged forwards and Alastor couldn't gather his wits quick enough to dodge out of the way. Suddenly, Valentino's hands were on his face and hips, holding him still as he bared his teeth angrily.

Alastor tried to recoil, to summon his shadows even though his mind wasn't fully in the present, but then there was a tongue in his mouth and Alastor felt like *prey*.

His body locked up, ears pinned to his skull and heart threatening to pound out of his chest. He couldn't *breathe* and one of Valentino's hands went to his throat and *squeezed* as something dripped onto his tongue.

He became trapped in his own memories, reliving every sensation and emotion he'd felt on that fateful night. Frantically, he tried to force his body to respond to his plea for escape but nothing happened. He had lost control, locked inside his own head, and all he could do was wait for Valentino to finish defiling him, wait for the three men to finish violating him, and soon, he couldn't tell what was past and what was present.

Valentino's fingers burned his skin where they dug into his hips and bile crawled up his throat as his mind grew a little greyer, fuzzier, his panic and fear fading into a familiar numbness. An injured doe with the wolf's jaws already at its neck.

His nausea spiked upon feeling the tent in his own slacks, his foul arousal building as more venom was pumped into his bloodstream.

He tried to call out for help like he had done in the forest that night, but the words wouldn't form and no one would have paid attention if they had.

Valentino laid a hand on the bulge in his trousers and white hot fear flooded Alastor's bloodstream. He threw a wild gaze to his trembling silhouette and the silhouette stared at him

helplessly for a moment before a truly feral expression overtook its simple features.

It rushed at Valentino, lashing out and clawing and biting at any bit of the moth-demon it could reach. Valentino screeched and released Alastor in favour of swiping at the shadow, but his fingers met with thin air, phasing through the silhouette's form.

Valentino tossed Alastor and the silhouette a terrified look before scrambling away, body hunched with agony as the back of his shirt darkened with blood.

Once Valentino was out of sight, the silhouette turned to face Alastor as the Radio Demon trembled violently, hidden by the darkness of nightfall.

It slunk towards him and he watched it, unable to react as it reached for him. It tugged gently on his sleeve, looking as broken as he felt as it tried to get him to move, to do *something*.

He was struck by how much he wanted Vox.

The silhouette met his gaze and tugged a little firmer on his sleeve.

Alastor dropped his gaze to his tented slacks. He couldn't let Vox see him like this. He couldn't let Vox see how soiled and repulsive and perverted he was. He couldn't let Vox see what he'd let Valentino do to him. He couldn't let Vox see how his body had *enjoyed*-

The tugging on his sleeve grew more insistent and he looked up at his frowning silhouette again. It seemed... drained.

Alastor swallowed and finally, his body began to move. His arms wrapped around his middle and he was suddenly so very cold. His breathing quickened and his eyes grew wider and he shrunk into his normal form, still trembling, still disgustingly hard, and he could taste the remnants of Valentino's venom on his tongue. Hot tears prickled his eyes and he swiped angrily at them, gritting his teeth.

A sob tried to claw its way out of his throat but he refused to let it. He squeezed his eyes shut as static crackled around him.

He needed Vox.

He stepped into the shadows and disappeared.

...And reappeared outside the broadcasting studio. He pressed himself against the wall and ran a hand through his dishevelled hair. He couldn't do this. He couldn't go inside that room and let Vox see him in such a state. He would ask questions that Alastor didn't want to answer, questions that he *couldn't* answer.

And what if Vox saw his tented slacks? Vox was clearly attracted to him; what if he thought that was an invitation to-

Alastor's silhouette appeared before him with a deep scowl and Alastor glowered at it when it crossed its arms.

"I can't," he hissed. "I can't do this."

The silhouette pointed at the door, eyes narrowing.

"He can't find out!" Alastor snapped, voice hushed so as not to alert Vox, who was waiting inside the studio.

The silhouette growled silently at him before tugging on his sleeve, trying to drag him towards the door. Alastor ripped his arm from its grip.

“He’ll think I’m *weak*, ” snarled Alastor. “Filthy and foul and depraved and- and-” His heart was beating so dreadfully fast and his breathing had picked up the pace again. He was hot and clammy and his knees felt terribly weak. His stomach rolled and his vision swam for a moment as he plastered himself against the wall for support.

The silhouette looked distressed and it pulled frantically at his coat, trying to herd him towards the door. It wanted to see Vox. It didn’t believe that Vox would think any of those things.

...Which meant that *Alastor* didn’t believe that Vox would think any of those things about him either.

He realised he was still trembling.

His shadow pulled hard on his coat and he stumbled, slamming against the door to the studio.

“Alastor, is that you?”

Hearing Vox’s deep voice had Alastor’s chest tightening and desperation drove him to slowly open the door.

“Did you have fun?” Vox asked drily, but he grunted when Alastor’s silhouette pounced on him, winding its arms around him and snuggling into his side as it began to shake.

Vox frowned at the silhouette in confusion for a moment before he lifted his gaze to Alastor, who stood helplessly in the door frame, face flushed with humiliation, smile strained and muscles quivering.

Vox gaped at him in stunned silence and then his gaze dropped to Alastor’s tented trousers. Alastor lowered his head, ashamed. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, although he didn’t know why he said it. Perhaps because he hadn’t wanted Vox to ever see him like this, hadn’t wanted Vox to find out how his body took *pleasure* in being assaulted.

He squeezed his eyes shut. He shouldn't have come here. Now Vox knew what he was. Knew how degenerate and perverse he was-

“Al, come here.”

Vox's voice was soft. Gentle. Alastor raised his gaze to find Vox smiling tentatively, arm outstretched towards him. An offer of sincere comfort from a man who loved him dearly.

Alastor's stomach churned and he doubled over and heaved violently.

Vox was quickly beside him, a hand on his stomach and back, trying to support him, trying to soothe him, but the touch startled Alastor and he blindly ordered his shadows to wrap around those unwanted, wandering hands and hurl his attacker against the opposite wall, putting as much distance between them as possible.

Vox grunted in pain and Alastor froze, breath hitching as Vox clambered unsteadily to his feet. The silhouette stared at Alastor in horror and Alastor shook his head, voice hoarse.

“Vox, I-”

“It's alright,” Vox dismissed, holding a hand up. “It was my fault. I caught you by surprise.”

Alastor's jaw clicked shut and Vox smiled sadly and tapped his lip. “He got you too, huh? Bastard.”

Alastor slowly raised his fingers to his lip, finding a sticky red substance trailing down his chin. He swallowed and scrubbed it away roughly, and Vox's gaze softened at his silence.

“What happened, Al?” Vox asked quietly. “You look like shit.” His gaze flicked briefly to Alastor’s softening dick. Apparently, vomiting one’s dinner up was enough to cancel out the arousing effects of Valentino’s venom.

Vox frowned for a moment before his eyes widened and his gaze burned with anger. “Wait, did he...?” He grit his teeth, fists clenching. “Alastor, what did he *do* to you?”

The question was too much. The rage in Vox’s gaze was too much. The fierce protectiveness in his tone was too much. The way he started towards Alastor then physically restrained himself because he didn’t want to push too hard was *too much*.

What had he done to deserve this patient, understanding, *devoted* man?

Alastor made it two steps towards Vox before his knees gave out and he collapsed onto them. He stared up at Vox despairingly.

“Vox,” he croaked.

Vox was there in an instant, worried, hands fluttering, desperate to touch but uncertain if he was allowed to, and Alastor reached for him, curling his fingers into his sweater.

“What did he do?” Vox demanded, quiet and furious as he *finally* gathered Alastor into his arms, pulling him away from the mess Alastor had made on the floor. “Talk to me, Al. What did the bastard do?”

Vox was becoming frantic, static thick in the air around them, and Alastor found his own shoulders slumping as his whole body was overwhelmed with relief. Vox wasn’t angry at *him*. He wasn’t disgusted or nauseated, even as Alastor crawled into his lap and hid his face in his chest.

Vox wound his arms around Alastor, curling around him protectively and rubbing one of his ears as he pressed his face into Alastor’s ruffled bangs. Alastor heaved a shaky sigh, snaking

his arms around Vox and holding him tightly as he tried to collect his thoughts.

He breathed in Vox's familiar cologne - something spicy with a hint of mandarin - and he found himself nuzzling into the column of Vox's throat. He was safe here. He was secure in Vox's arms.

Vox drew his knees up behind Alastor's back, walling him in, *protecting* him, and he petted Alastor's ear and rubbed his back and pulsed tiny bursts of reassuring static against Alastor's head.

"I'll kill him," Vox hissed. "I'll tear his wings off. I'll break every bone in his body. I'll rip his heart out of his chest and fry it to a crisp. I'll hack his dick off with a *butter knife*."

"I've already torn his wings off," Alastor managed as he pressed himself flush with Vox, trying to push closer, trying to bury himself in this wonderful sensation of warmth and safety and unconditional love.

His heart skipped a beat. Vox loved him *unconditionally*.

"Good," Vox whispered viciously and Alastor realised he should probably reassure Vox before the other Overlord began foaming at the mouth and plotting a bloody rampage.

"He didn't-" Alastor began, then abruptly cut himself off, mouth going dry. He tried again. "It was just a kiss. And the... the saliva." His cheeks heated in shame and he hid his face deeper into Vox's chest. Why was this so difficult to talk about? It was nothing compared to what had happened to him when he was *alive*. He forced onwards through gritted teeth. "I panicked when he put his hand..." He trailed off again. "He didn't actually..."

It was rare that words failed Alastor, but he just couldn't seem to string a full sentence together right now. He swallowed thickly and Vox scratched the base of his ear, seeming at least a little relieved.

“I’d still very much like to kill him, if that’s okay with you,” Vox whispered, and just like that, Alastor realised that he’d had nothing to fear from the start.

Moreover, Vox had just proved that Alastor could trust him with one of his biggest secrets, that he wouldn’t run away or sneer in disgust or look upon Alastor with disappointment... Vox was loyal and understanding and protective and *why* had Alastor ever doubted him?

Alastor’s breathing slowed to match Vox’s and he focused on the gentle fingers on his ear and the warm palm against his back and he returned Vox’s tiny pulses of static, shifting to press his forehead against Vox’s. He curled an arm around Vox’s back and smoothed the other over Vox’s chest and allowed it to settle on his shoulder. He had no idea what he was doing but he just wanted to *feel* Vox. He wanted Vox to know how much he appreciated the Television Demon.

Vox’s eyes opened and a small smile pulled at his mouth, their heads still pressed together. Vox’s hand slipped slowly from Alastor’s ear to his cheek, thumb stroking tenderly over the flushed skin, and Alastor leaned into his palm, eyes growing half-lidded with contentment.

Vox studied his expression with an affectionate gaze and Alastor found his fingers tracing over Vox’s boxy casing, curious and adoring and Vox’s smile stretched a little wider.

Fingers brushed along Alastor’s jaw, exploring, and Alastor tipped his head slightly, exposing his neck. The fingers slid down his jugular, light and gentle, before hitting his collar and trailing back to his cheek.

Alastor watched his own hand glide over Vox’s casing down to his neck, his palm curling around the back of it possessively.

A thumb swept over Alastor’s cheekbone and Alastor caught Vox’s hand and pressed his lips to his palm, slow and tender.

Vox’s breath hitched so quietly that Alastor almost missed it. After a few seconds, Alastor moved his lips to Vox’s inner wrist, pressing a long kiss to the pulse point.

Vox sighed and caught Alastor's chin between his finger and thumb. He looked... resigned.

"Remember all those years ago when I said we search for comfort in strange ways when we feel broken enough?"

Alastor stared at him, eyes wide and Vox offered him a sad smile, carefully withdrawing his hand from Alastor's grasp. "This is one of those times."

The rejection was like a kick to the stomach.

"Vox, I don't think-"

"I won't take advantage of you when you're clearly upset," Vox said firmly before his gaze dropped. He looked so *sad*. "If you still feel the same way once you're in a better headspace, then we'll talk," he muttered, as though he had already accepted that there was no possibility of that happening.

Alastor licked his lips, feeling too many conflicting emotions. The rejection still stung but it was reassuring to know that Vox cared so deeply about him that he was willing to put aside his own feelings to ensure Alastor's comfort.

...Perhaps Vox was right. Perhaps this was neither the time nor place to be making such monumental decisions.

Reluctantly, he pulled away from Vox and rose to his feet. He pretended to have missed Vox's miserable sigh and stepped back to allow the Television Demon to stand. Alastor straightened his tie, merely to busy his hands.

"The good news is that I don't think that moth-demon will bother us again," Alastor said, feigning cheer.

Vox cocked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Well, he did flee rather quickly. And he was certainly sporting more holes than he’d probably anticipated at the beginning of his evening.”

Vox huffed a laugh. “I see. So you had some fun, at least?”

“His screams are surprisingly shrill for such a large demon,” commented Alastor, relaxing at Vox’s genuine grin.

“Come on,” Vox said, crooking his elbow for Alastor to take. “I’ll walk you home.”

“And they say chivalry is dead,” hummed Alastor, earning himself a snort.

“It is. We’re both in Hell, remember?”

Alastor took Vox’s arm and wondered if Vox could hear the way his heart was trying to burst out of his chest. He flicked his gaze to his silhouette as it reappeared on the floor beside him and fixed Vox with its gooeyest, most infatuated smile.

He hummed at it in amusement before leaning his head against Vox’s as they walked.

“You are the most charming man I have ever met,” he whispered as they stepped outside.

Vox’s eyes slipped shut before he swivelled his head and fluttered his lips over Alastor’s ear in the barest hint of a kiss. “And you make it very difficult for me to do the right thing,” he breathed.

Alastor held back a shiver. "...I'd let you have me," he whispered, heart racing.

"I know you would," Vox murmured. "Which is why I have to be the one to say *no*. You already know how I feel about you, that isn't going to change any time soon. Don't make any rash decisions tonight."

It was true. Vox hadn't said the words, hadn't explicitly told Alastor how he felt, but Alastor *knew*.

The rest of the walk passed in a strange sort of silence, both acutely aware of each other's longing. When Vox dropped Alastor off at his house, Alastor grasped one of his hands and the Television Demon tilted his head in query.

"You could stay the night?" Alastor suggested and at Vox's startled expression, he hurried on. "In the guest room. I'll even let you tempt me into watching one of your ridiculous action movies."

Vox licked his lips and stared at Alastor, looking as though he very much wanted to take the offer. Alastor squeezed his fingers hopefully.

Finally, Vox grimaced and slid his hand from Alastor's grip and Alastor was winded by the disappointment that tightened his chest. Vox retreated slowly from the door.

"I'll see you soon, Al," he murmured. "Goodnight."

Alastor watched Vox escape into a streetlamp and he stared at the dim, yellow light for a long moment, breaths quiet and ragged. His heart ached at the rejection and he wondered if he currently looked as desperate and pathetic as he had sounded.

He closed the door slowly and felt like a fool.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Rape scene in the italic section. Also one racist slur in this section.

Hey look at that - Alastor being rejected by Vox for once! On a side note, I've been thinking about setting up a twitter account to post doodles (I'm not an artist by any means, but writing this fic has got me doodling), and maybe chat to people who want to chat. I'll be starting a new job in a week so I won't be able to post chapters so often, but I can maybe put sneak peeks on there if people are interested? Let me know - and be honest with me, if you think it's a terrible idea I promise I won't be offended XD

Chapter 13: Finding Friends In The Unlikeliest Of Places

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It had been two days since the confrontation with Valentino, since Alastor had offered to make every single fantasy of Vox's come true, only for Vox to feel a sense of *moral obligation* and sprout an *ethical conscience*. Damn it. Might as well have shoved his entire foot in his mouth whilst he was at it.

Not that he regretted being a considerate gentleman, of course, and he was honestly surprised he had managed to push Alastor away when he had because as it stood currently, if Alastor asked him to bark, he'd ask 'what breed of dog?'

So, as besotted as he was with Alastor, he was pretty impressed that he'd managed to restrain himself. However, that didn't mean that he wasn't mourning the loss of what could have been according to his creative imagination.

And his moral and ethical limits were still being tested! Alastor had yet to talk to him about anything that had happened, had yet to talk to him *at all*, and Vox wasn't sure if it was because he was humiliated by what he had offered Vox, or if it was because he was licking his wounds after Vox's gentle rejection. It was *maddening*, not knowing. Vox would love to kick down Alastor's door and demand answers, but he knew he had to wait for the Radio Demon to collect his thoughts and come to him first.

In the meantime, Vox had to smile for the cameras and hide the fact that he was suffering and feeling utterly miserable on the inside.

"Ratings are down another two-point-three percent since last month, sir."

Vox's eyes slipped shut. And herein lay his other problem. "And Dolby's networks?"

"...On average? Increased by two-point-one," said his assistant with a grimace, holding his clipboard out for Vox to peer at.

Vox's shoulders slumped as his head fell back against the chair. Dolby was a rival media Overlord in the Entertainment District - one who was also trying to make a name for himself in the world of television. He wasn't as powerful as Vox but he was certainly rising through the ranks quickly, gaining viewers with his cheap shows and tasteless content.

Television was changing because people's tastes were changing. What impressed an audience twenty years ago was unlikely to impress them now.

Vox drummed his nails on the arm of his chair. He needed fresh, interesting content. He didn't want to copy the tacky *crap* that Dolby manufactured - the endless game shows and poorly-acted soap operas with increasingly ridiculous plotlines - but sitcoms and action-filled westerns just weren't keeping the public's attention anymore. His medical dramas seemed to have captured the viewers' intrigue - likely because of all the open chests and spilled intestines - and the pilot of the crime show that aired a couple of days ago did *extremely* well. Perhaps he should wrangle together a few more crime writers? Or maybe branch out into sci-fi? They had colour television now (something he and his team had worked *very* hard on), so that opened up a lot of opportunities special effects-wise.

"There's also the issue of the editors..."

Vox straightened, whirling the chair around to face his newt-like assistant. "What issue? I've not been informed about any *issue*."

His assistant, Data, grimaced. "Dolby offered them a substantial pay raise if they came to work on his medical show instead. I caught the email this morning when one of the editors took a bathroom break."

Irritation caused a flicker of charge between Vox's antennae. "The medical show that Dolby copied off me?"

Data nodded apologetically.

“How much of a pay increase?”

“Twenty percent.”

Vox cursed beneath his breath. “Where is he even getting that sort of profit from? He must have a side-job. Arms dealing or drugs or loan sharking... No way is he making more money than me.”

Data stared at Vox silently and Vox scrubbed a hand over his screen. “Okay. Offer them fifteen percent and throw in a higher holiday bonus and some better medical coverage. If they’re still intent on leaving, let me know and I... I’ll see what I can do.”

“I’ll write them an email,” Data said before he whirled on his heel and left Vox alone in his office.

It was entirely possible that Dolby was making more money than him if production costs for his shows were low enough, Vox mused. Vox had always strived for higher quality entertainment, but quality was expensive and these days, audiences grew bored of clever story-lines and long action sequences. They wanted fast-paced entertainment, shows that didn’t have overarching plot lines over a series of episodes, shows that gave them a *thrill*.

Vox needed time to think.

With a sigh, he rose from his chair and decided to head out for lunch. Perhaps the fresh air (well, as fresh as Hell’s *rot* could ever be) would clear his head. He made it halfway to one of his favourite cafés when he spotted a familiar face down a narrow alleyway.

He should keep walking. He should buy his coffee and his bagel, sit down for twenty minutes in a bright window, and head back to his office feeling refreshed.

He absolutely shouldn’t, under any circumstances, prowl into that alley and beat the ever-loving *shit* out of the moth-man.

He shouldn't.

His fingertips crackled with electricity.

His feet moved of their own free will and he watched Valentino trail his fingers down the jaw of a pretty conure-sinner. He wore a leather jacket - likely to compensate for the fact that he was missing his wings (although there were already two tented areas of the jacket where the wings were likely starting to regrow) and Vox grit his teeth when the conure-sinner handed Valentino some money before he tugged her in for a french kiss.

Vox stalked towards them quietly and waited for Valentino to pull away from the other sinner; her gaze now glassy and her pupils blown. Red saliva trickled from her hooked beak.

She stepped away, reactions clearly slowed but her feathers were fluffed and she looked up at Valentino through long eyelashes, expression downright sinful. Valentino's hands traced the outline of her body and her eyes fluttered closed. He smirked and squeezed one of her breasts.

Vox socked him in the mouth.

Valentino yelped and stumbled before whirling on Vox with a snarl. "I am going to paint the wall with your-" He cut himself off, eyes widening at Vox and the electricity sparking across his body. "Oh, shit."

Vox smirked viciously. "How do you like your balls? Lightly fried or extra crispy?"

Valentino swallowed then took off running down the alley. Fiery excitement raced through Vox's blood stream. Let the hunt begin.

He zipped into the power grid and re-materialised in front of Valentino, earning a shrill scream as the moth-demon came to a hard stop and retreated in the direction he had come from. Vox used the power grid to appear in front of him once more and Valentino shrieked as Vox grazed his arm, sending electricity gnawing through his skin.

Valentino recoiled and stretched his back out strangely as he jerked his shoulders, but then his eyes widened and he staggered away from Vox. Vox laughed as he realised Valentino had just tried to *fly away*.

The moth-demon reached into his jacket and brandished a gun at Vox's screen but Vox was quicker and wrapped his fingers around the metal muzzle of the gun before Valentino could properly steady it. Vox generated a current and Valentino quickly released the gun with a hiss as his hand was burned.

Vox twirled the gun around his fingers cheerily and aimed it at Valentino's bald head.

"You must go through these like toilet paper if you're so bad at holding onto them," Vox commented.

Valentino bared his teeth. "What do you want from me? I wasn't bothering you."

Vox's grin tightened, eyes narrowing. "I heard you weren't very *polite* to a friend of mine."

Valentino hesitated before he clenched his fists and threw his upper set of arms out dramatically. "The Radio Demon? He ripped my damn wings off! *He* attacked *me!*"

"And you shoved your tongue in his mouth and groped him, just like you were doing to that poor woman back there. So, I think that makes you about even," Vox growled, allowing electricity to dance over his knuckles.

Valentino looked momentarily bewildered and then his expression contorted with anger. "He was trying to *kill* me!" He jabbed an accusing finger in Vox's direction. "And you stole my

gun! What was I supposed to do? Let him tear me to shreds? In case you haven't noticed, dumbass, I'm not built for fighting! My abilities lie in my *saliva!*"

Surprise flickered over Vox's screen as Valentino gestured down at himself.

"I started off down here as a *whore*. A slut with a tongue that gets people high. My guns are my weapons and when they're gone, the only thing I have left is a tongue that dopes people up long enough for me to *escape*." Valentino scowled. "A tongue that hasn't quite healed after you *bit it off*."

Vox lowered the gun a fraction. "Bullshit. You felt Alastor up. Why not just escape?"

Valentino threw his arms out theatrically once more. "Because he still had control of those damn shadows! I saw his freaky silhouette lurking on the wall, even when I was dripping enough saliva down his throat to make a *rhino* horny. I figured the moment I stepped away, that thing would be on me." He crossed both sets of arms. "Most sinners can't think straight for a while after they come. I was trying to get him off so I had time to escape, since I couldn't *fly*."

Vox fell silent as Valentino pouted. "But that thing jumped on me before I could get any further." He narrowed his eyes. "And that *woman* was a client of mine. She paid me to dope her up and get her off in some, frankly, quite disgusting back alley." He averted his gaze. "Since apparently, that's all I'm good for."

A flicker of sympathy started in Vox's chest at the miserable tone and he squashed it ruthlessly.

"You're a porn director and Overlord," Vox deadpanned. "Don't pretend you're a sad little whore."

"Exactly, I'm not a *producer*," Valentino hissed. "I just work for someone else while making it seem like I'm the one in charge. And I own the souls of a bunch of junkies and sex-addicts who either saw me as a walking, talking *bong* or thought I was a piece of meat with some mildly entertaining holes!"

Vox licked his lips then lowered the gun fully. “You were going to shoot me at the bar.”

A soft growl fell from Valentino’s chest before he lowered his gaze. “...I was having a bad day. My producer decided to take his frustrations out on me. I went to the bar to take out *my* frustrations on an entire bottle of merlot. Or four. Then you showed up, looking miserable. Thought I’d introduce myself and we could be miserable together.”

Valentino scowled. “But you looked at me the way everyone else does. You didn’t even *recognise* me at first, yet you still looked at me like you were picturing all the ways you could use my mouth.” He sneered at Vox. “So, I took a stupid risk because I figured with your power I might be able to leave my shitty producer without a director, but it didn’t pay off because it turns out that you don’t think *entirely* with your dick.”

Don’t do it, Vox. Don’t feel sorry for the guy who tried to put a bullet through your head. Twice.

“Just to be clear,” Vox said as he clicked the safety catch on and slowly offered the gun to Valentino, “you flirted with me first.”

Valentino blinked then carefully grasped his gun. He immediately aimed it at Vox’s screen with a snarl.

Vox stared at him, unimpressed.

Valentino lowered the gun. “Yeah, well. I flirt with everyone. You’re nothing special.”

A smile twitched Vox’s lips. Why was he such a sucker for Overlords who tried to kill him? He stretched his hand out in a peace offering. “Would you like to start over?”

Valentino eyed him suspiciously.

“Vox. You might know me as the Television Demon,” he smiled his most charming business smile.

Valentino edged closer and carefully shook his hand. “Valentino. A pleasure,” he said slowly, looking wary.

“Well, Valentino. I apologise for interrupting your business transaction earlier... and for everything else that followed. May I buy you lunch as compensation?”

Valentino straightened, eyes widening behind his ridiculous heart-shaped glasses. Then he squinted at Vox. “If you think I’m going to suck your cock for a *salad*-”

“I don’t want anything like that,” Vox assured quickly, holding his hands up. “I just... want to apologise for the misunderstanding.”

Valentino’s jaw clicked shut and Vox gestured for him to follow, which the moth-demon did, albeit a few steps behind. The conure-sinner from earlier had disappeared, so Vox led Valentino into the café.

“Anything you like,” Vox said as his gaze landed on the bagel section. Oh, they had a new filling! Lovely.

“A house salad, then,” Valentino said, barely even glimpsing the menu. “And a black coffee.”

Vox frowned, raking his gaze over Valentino’s tall, slim build. “...You sure that’s all you want? That’s like... the two cheapest things you can order. I literally punched you in the face. Take advantage of me, I have the money for it.”

Valentino cocked an eyebrow.

Vox's screen tinted pink. "I don't mean like that! I mean-" He wiggled the menu. "Get some proper meat in you."

Valentino's other eyebrow joined the first and Vox's fans flipped on as he straightened.

"I didn't mean that either! That sounds-" He shook his head rapidly. "You know what I'm getting at! A bit of carrot and a cucumber are hardly gonna fill you up; you're a big boy-" Vox's screen blazed red as he used his menu to cover his face. "...Feel free to stop me at any time," he groaned.

Valentino chuckled softly. He didn't sound angry, at least. When Vox dared to lift his head, Valentino was watching him in amusement. Vox set his menu down and smoothed his palms over it.

"What I'm trying to say is pick whatever you want."

Valentino hummed. "So, you wouldn't mind me getting some sausages?"

Vox slowly let his head drop into his hands.

Valentino flicked Vox's antenna curiously, watching it bounce, and Vox raised his gaze, startled at the contact. Valentino clasped his hands together and plastered on a smirk that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"The salad is fine. I'm watching my figure."

Vox frowned, gaze roaming over Valentino's body again, ignoring how the moth-demon narrowed his eyes. If anything, Valentino looked underweight.

"Oh. Right. That's... fine."

Valentino tilted his head in irritation, lips curving into a defensive sneer. “Spit it out. You clearly have an *opinion* you’d like to share.”

Vox jerked a little before locking his fingers together. “No! No. I... uh... You look great. Gorgeous. Ah...” He swallowed and wondered when he was going to stop making a fool out of himself.

“But...?” Valentino asked slowly, frowning, his lower set of arms crossing over his stomach almost defensively.

Weight was a sore point, then. The worst thing Vox could do right now was tell Valentino that he didn’t need to worry about his weight, that he should eat something more substantial. He’d had friends with eating disorders in life and he had seen them become worse because of pushy people thinking they were helping.

He smiled lopsidedly. *Unthreatening*. “But nothing. You look great. So, just a black coffee or do you want something fancy? I was thinking of a latté with a dash of honey. It tastes amazing - especially when you have a sweet tooth like me.”

Valentino stared at him for a moment and the tension eased out of his frame. “...I do have a sweet tooth.” He looked torn for a moment. “I’m sure Eros wouldn’t mind me indulging in one sugary coffee. Why not?”

Vox grinned and caught the attention of the waitress. Once he had ordered, he glanced over at Valentino casually. “Is Eros a colleague of yours?” he asked lightly.

Valentino pulled a face. “My producer.”

“...His name is *Eros*?”

“Don’t get me started,” Valentino huffed in disdain. “He’s an asshole. If he didn’t *pay* me, I’d have already shot his dick off. And the pay is *shit*, hence my side-jobs.” He gestured to the alley that was barely visible from the window.

“Is he the asshole telling you to watch your figure?” Vox asked carefully and Valentino frowned before nodding.

“He’s also the asshole that ‘hates that gay shit’ but makes me record *special videos* for his VIP clients and thinks he’s entitled to my saliva because I work for him. I wouldn’t put my own actors through some of the things he makes me do.” He blinked, looking surprised at himself, as though he possibly revealed a little more than he had anticipated.

Pity lapped at Vox’s gut. “He got you on a chain?”

A growl tore from Valentino’s throat. “How stupid do you think I am?”

Vox’s mind wandered back to Alastor. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Shit happens in Hell, even to Overlords.”

Valentino looked at Vox strangely and Vox waved a hand dismissively. “Not me, but I know it can happen.”

Their drinks arrived and Valentino’s fuzzy antennae... vibrated. It was weirdly adorable. When he lifted the sugary drink to his lips, they vibrated faster and his eyes slipped shut in obvious bliss.

Vox took a sip of his coffee and bit back an amused grin. Nowhere near as cute as Alastor’s ears - not that he would ever tell the Radio Demon that his ears were *cute* - but the striped antennae were certainly entertaining.

There was something endlessly fascinating to Vox about animal-sinners. Perhaps it was their softness, the way they moved and flowed, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes not. They were

never *still*. Vox could feel every movement in his body - even his own heart pumping a steady rhythm. He could shut the sensory pathways down so that he wasn't overloaded with useless inputs, but there was something so utterly intriguing about not having to manually do that.

To be quite honest, Vox had forgotten how it felt to *not* have full control over his entire body. He had an involuntary nervous system of sorts, but since it was mostly made of wiring he could easily shut it off. Not that he ever did - it helped him to remember that he had once been human before all the metal and cables and the ugly mess he hid behind long-sleeved sweaters and full-length trousers.

Valentino drank the coffee as though he had been lost in a desert for two weeks. He drained the cup and set it down, then grimaced, looking embarrassed.

Their food arrived and before the waitress could disappear, Vox ordered another honey latté.

Valentino looked uncertain. "Vox, I really shouldn't-"

"I won't tell Eros if you don't," Vox said, taking another sip of his own coffee. He met Valentino's eyes over the rim of the mug and winked cheekily.

Valentino's antennae straightened a fraction before a small smile pulled at his lips and he began picking at his salad.

Vox tucked into his bagel and gave a pornographic groan at the first bite. Then he remembered that he wasn't with Alastor and that Valentino might not simply roll his eyes and tell him that he sounded like a dying cow.

He was about to apologise when he saw Valentino's fork hovering halfway to his open mouth, any food that had been on it dropped onto the plate as Valentino stared at him with wide eyes.

Vox cleared his throat awkwardly. “I uh... I haven’t had this one before.” He pointed at the bagel.

There was a long pause.

“...Do you have a food play kink?”

Vox grimaced. “I think I have a humiliation kink.”

Valentino’s eyes grew impossibly wider and Vox’s screen turned crimson as his fans flicked on at full power.

“I... I meant a kink for humiliating myself. Wait, no- I’m gonna shut up now.”

A truly devious smile spread across Valentino’s face as delight filled his gaze. “No, no. Keep going. I want to hear more about your *kinks*. ”

“I’m usually more put together than this,” Vox whined. “People tell me I’m *charming*. ”

“Do they really?”

“Yes. They tell me I’m witty, too.”

“Well, you’re certainly entertaining me.”

Vox covered his screen with his hands. “What is *wrong* with me?”

“Perhaps I just have that effect on you,” Valentino purred and Vox peered through his fingers in time to see Valentino’s mask slide into place - the persona he wore like a second skin. “Perhaps I could help you explore a few of those *kinks*, amorcito...”

Vox straightened, drawing away from Valentino with a frown. “Thought you weren’t sucking my cock for a salad?”

Valentino smirked. “Not for a salad, no. But if you pay the right price, I could give you an evening you’ll *never* forget.”

“No.”

A pause. “...No?”

“No,” Vox reiterated firmly. “Like I said, I didn’t have any ulterior motives when I brought you here and I still don’t.” He fixed Valentino with a hard look. “Do you?” He splayed a hand over the top of his coffee and deliberately pulled it closer to him.

Valentino’s shoulders sagged. “No,” he said quietly, looking quite *lost*. “I just assumed...”

Vox uncurled his fingers from the top of the mug. He got the feeling that a lot of people didn’t treat Valentino like he was an actual person. Vox related to that more than he would have liked to admit. Taking his shirt off often led to people forgetting that he was a person, which... didn’t always play out so well in the middle of a one-night stand. Sinners had walked out on him before the night had started, and the ones that stayed often forgot that he could still *feel* what they were doing to him, hence why some got carried away despite his protests.

“I get it,” muttered Vox. “It’s called *Hell* for a reason. Everyone takes as much as they can from everyone else and you have to either learn to roll with it or let it break you.” Or find yourself a Radio Demon you can fully trust and confide in and know that you have each other’s backs.

Valentino pushed his salad around his plate with his fork. “I can’t even remember what’s *me* and what’s Eros’ perfect little *doll*,” Valentino murmured.

Vox’s heart twinged with sympathy. “You can’t just... find a new job?”

“And have Eros sic his little minions on me?” Valentino scoffed. “Like I said, I’m not built for fighting. Even my wings are soft, like velvet. Easy to tear.” He rolled his shoulders. “I can’t leave without guaranteed protection.”

Vox’s shoulders sagged. Poor thing.

Soon, conversation turned lighter, with Valentino revealing that he was an avid fan of Vox’s medical dramas and that he had also enjoyed the crime show pilot. He was easy to talk to - almost as easy as Alastor - and it had been a long time since Vox had felt this comfortable talking to another Overlord aside from the Radio Demon.

At the end of their meal, Vox checked the time and grimaced. He’d been chatting with Valentino for an hour and a half. “It’s been great talking to you, Val, but uh... I should be working.”

“So should I,” Valentino smirked. “This was nice. Thank you. Consider yourself forgiven for socking me in the mouth.”

Vox huffed a laugh and stood, but blinked when Valentino handed him a black business card. There was a smoky red heart in the centre with a pair of long legs wrapped in fishnet stockings and red heels - clearly Valentino’s legs - jutting out from the right-hand side of the card. Valentino’s name and phone number lay on the left side of the card in a swirling purple font. *Chase your greatest high and live your wildest fantasies*, read the text at the bottom of the card.

A pink tint appeared on Vox’s screen once more and Valentino’s smirk drew wider with amusement. “Call me if you ever want to do this again.” Something behind his eyes shifted, smile sharpening. “Or if you ever want my *services*, amorcito.”

With a frown creasing Vox's expression, he turned the card over to reveal its white back and he retrieved a pen from his pocket. He scrawled his name and number over the card and passed it back to Valentino, who took it with a confused look.

"If you want to meet me for lunch again, give me a call. My lunch hour usually starts at one, but I'll let you know if I'm running behind."

Valentino stared at the card for a moment and his gaze softened slowly. "...I... Thank you, Vox."

Vox offered him a smile. He wouldn't reveal that he had a photographic memory because of all the cameras and processors that allowed him to *see*, and that he wouldn't be able to forget Valentino's number unless he physically deleted the memory from his system. That wasn't the point. The point was that the ball was in Valentino's court now and that meant that there was no chance of Vox requesting his company for his *services* because Valentino would be the one calling Vox first.

"See you around, Val," Vox said, giving a small wave as he left the café. He risked a glance at the window to find Valentino smiling fondly at the card in his hands, antennae flopping forwards and twitching slightly.

Vox sauntered back to his studio and wondered how he would explain the entire 'Valentino' misunderstanding to Alastor... once Alastor started talking to him again, of course.

He was certain Alastor would take it in his stride with as much grace and patience as he always did.

Chapter End Notes

What's this? Valentino not being a total scumbag? Well, I'm sure this won't affect Alastor and Vox in *any* way :)

Chapter 14: Confessions Of A Serial-Killing Radio Demon

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

It had been five days since Vox had rejected Alastor's offer to stay over and Alastor had thought long and hard about what he wanted, about what he already had with Vox, and about how much of himself he was willing to give to the other Overlord.

His feelings of foolishness had subsided after a couple of days and he was grateful that Vox had the strength to push him away when Alastor's own mind was so muddled. It had given him time to weigh up the benefits and drawbacks of entering a relationship considering his history and... *quirks*.

Alastor had never been in a relationship with a man before and had always considered himself heterosexual, so that was also something to contemplate. Sex wasn't something he was comfortable navigating given his past, and he *knew* Vox would ask why Alastor couldn't give him that part of himself, meaning Alastor would likely have to explain what had happened to him.

It wasn't a decision to be made lightly. He would be making himself vulnerable; opening himself up to Vox's judgement, revealing his weaknesses, testing his own mental and physical limits by allowing such a powerful man so close to him. It could break him. Traumatise him further. He could end up irreparably damaging his friendship with Vox.

And yet.

And yet he had decided that Vox was worth the risk. He *loved* Vox. There was no point in trying to deny it.

He wouldn't be able to give Vox sex, but deep down he knew that Vox wouldn't care about that. He would reveal weaknesses to Vox that other Overlords would most definitely exploit, but he knew that Vox would guard his secrets. He would test his limits by allowing a powerful man close to him, but he already had butterflies trying to break out of his chest whenever Vox danced with him. He would have to discuss his humiliating past, but he knew that Vox would hold him and reassure him and tell him he was loved... because he already had. Perhaps not in so many words, but their tender embrace in the radio tower had convinced Alastor that he had nothing to be afraid of when it came to Vox.

He was meeting Vox for lunch today and he was *excited*. The sort of nervous excitement that had his ears twitching and his smile reaching his eyes. He could feel his deer tail attempting to wiggle beneath all the layers of clothing he trapped it under and he chuckled to himself - now *there* was a secret he was sure that Vox was going to enjoy discovering. It wasn't something he particularly liked about himself since it reminded him of how much he resembled *prey*, so he tended to keep it hidden, but he was certain Vox would get a kick out of it.

He straightened his bowtie in the mirror, catching sight of his silhouette making heart shapes at him with its hands.

"Oh shush," Alastor said, amused and the silhouette grinned and appeared beside him, fluffing up his hair. He swatted it away even though he couldn't physically touch it and it laughed silently when he glanced at himself in the mirror and decided that his hair actually looked quite nice.

He pointed a finger at the grinning shadow. "No theatrics," he said. "I need to have a serious conversation with Vox. There's a lot he needs to understand."

The silhouette saluted before becoming dormant once more and Alastor rolled his eyes before grabbing his cane and taking a breath.

He melted into the shadows at the edges of his bedroom and reappeared at the side of Vox's favourite café. His smile widened when he spotted Vox inside, at his favourite table in the window. He headed inside, ignoring the sinners that pinned themselves against the wall when he entered, and he curled his fingers over the back of the chair opposite Vox.

“Is this seat taken?” he asked nonchalantly and Vox pulled a face.

“Actually, yeah. I’m waiting for someone. Can you sit somewhere else?”

“Oh?” Alastor asked airily. “Hot date?”

Vox leaned forward, propping his head on one hand with a smirk. “Actually, he’s a real *deer*.”

Alastor tried not to let his eyes roll too far into the back of his head as he took the seat. Once he sobered, he found Vox smiling brightly at him and his own chest flooded with warmth. He reached for the hand Vox wasn’t using to prop his head up and he took it gently, stroking his thumb over Vox’s knuckles.

Vox glanced down at their joined hands in surprise before excitement flashed behind his digital eyes and he fixed Alastor with a fond expression.

“You said you wanted to discuss something with me?” Vox prompted, clearly trying to restrain his enthusiasm and doing a terrible job at it.

“First, I want to thank you for the other night,” Alastor said, squeezing Vox’s fingers gently. “For recognising that I wasn’t quite... myself. For giving me time to recover, time to *think*.”

Vox’s gaze softened and Alastor almost laughed at how love-struck he looked.

“You’re welcome,” Vox said before he blinked and raised his head off his hand a fraction. “Oh! Actually, there’s something I need to talk to you about too! But uh... you first.”

Alastor resumed stroking Vox’s knuckles. “Yes, well... It was very appreciated. I’ve taken some time to consider our friendship, to consider how much you mean to me, and I think-”

“Vox!”

There was a moment where Vox’s expression couldn’t quite settle between confusion, recognition, and blind panic, but Alastor was pretty certain he had heard that voice before, even if he couldn’t place it, and he turned curiously.

White hot fury flooded his veins and a snarl tore from his lips as he summoned his shadows.

Finally, Valentino seemed to notice him and his eyes blew wide, mouth falling slack as he attempted to skitter backwards, only to knock into the table behind him.

Alastor commanded his shadows to rear above Valentino, but was shocked when Vox suddenly grasped his hands.

“Wait!”

Alastor turned his wild-eyed gaze to Vox and noticed that the Television Demon was being quite serious. His gaze flicked back to Valentino and a combination of nausea and rage swept over him again. His silhouette jerked out of dormancy and clawed its way towards Valentino like an Eldritch horror nightmare.

“Al, stop!” Vox said again, tightening his grip on Alastor’s hands.

Alastor sent him a bewildered look. The silhouette wrapped its claws around Valentino’s throat and Vox turned to it quickly.

“Drop him!”

The silhouette scowled at Vox as Alastor’s eyes widened in alarm. What was happening?

“I said drop him!” Vox snapped and the silhouette released Valentino slowly, looking to Alastor in confusion.

As Valentino gasped in a few desperate breaths, Vox grimaced and flicked his apologetic gaze to Alastor. “Uh... This is what I wanted to talk to you about...”

The room was spinning and Alastor felt extremely hot all of a sudden. Bile threatened to rise up his throat as his heart pounded in double time.

“Al,” Vox said gently. “Breathe.”

Alastor sucked in a breath and then another and he caught Vox shaking his head subtly at Valentino before returning his focus to Alastor once more.

“Let me explain?” Vox whispered and Alastor shot him a frantic look.

“What is there to explain?” he hissed. “That foul, perverted-”

“I know,” Vox said with a grimace. “I know. But, look, it’s complicated. He explained it to me. The saliva is a sort of self-defence-”

“*Self-defence?*” Alastor snarled and Vox winced and squeezed his hands.

“Listen to me for a sec,” he pleaded quietly. “What he did was crappy and I was all for frying his ass when I caught him in an alley a couple of days ago. I chased him and he pulled a gun on me-”

“You worthless piece of shit!” Alastor hissed as he turned to Valentino and ordered his shadows to wrap around his limbs.

Valentino squeaked and wriggled uselessly against his restraints as Vox tugged on Alastor's hands to get his attention.

"We talked!" Vox said hurriedly. "We talked and it turns out he isn't that bad."

Alastor's eyes couldn't grow any wider. "Vox, and I say this with genuine concern, *have you lost your damn mind?*"

Vox stared into his eyes and Alastor was horrified to find that he wasn't pulling some sort of horrendously unamusing prank. "Al, *please* let him go."

They gazed at each other for a long moment.

"Trust me," Vox whispered.

Alastor's lips pressed together. "I trust *you*, Vox. Valentino is the problem here."

"I promise he's not," Vox said quietly. "His afterlife is shit. He's just doing what he has to so he can survive down here."

Alastor frowned. "You really believe that? He tells you a sob story and you just... believe him?"

"What reason would he have to spin a story like that? What would he have to gain?"

Alastor stared in disbelief. "Vox, you are a powerful Overlord. He could be trying to gain sympathy from you so he can betray you later and take your power. He could be trying to steal from you. He could be looking for protection from someone who might cause you problems that you don't need. *Think*, Vox. Why would you believe a word he says after what he did to both of us?"

Vox swallowed, then licked his lips and Alastor's heart sank at his expression. *Don't say it, Vox...*

"I just... I feel sorry for him, okay? He's a little bit broken, same as us, and... well... you gave me a chance, right? Give him a few minutes to explain himself?"

Alastor could feel his ears dropping. "*You* didn't ram your tongue down my throat at our first meeting."

"No, but I did electrocute you," Vox pointed out. "*And* I practically stalked you for several weeks, yet you still took a chance on me."

"It's different," Alastor protested. "*You* are different. You're not like other sinners, not like other Overlords. There are hundreds of Valentinos down here, but you... Vox, you're a diamond in the rough. You're special."

"You're *biased*," Vox whispered. "If you give him a chance, you might like him."

"I won't," growled Alastor. "Not with the things he's capable of."

Vox frowned. "Now, that's hardly fair. He didn't exactly *choose* to have a tongue that drugs people, that makes them horny. He's got no other way of defending himself, Al. He's not built for fighting. He's pretty much screwed if he loses his guns. The only thing he can do in that situation is try to dope his attacker up enough to give him time to escape - which is what he was trying to do with you."

Alastor shook his head in frustration. "He tried to... He was going to..." Why didn't Vox understand? He had seen what Alastor had been reduced to that night. Granted, there were other factors at play, mainly his own memories, and this *was* Hell - scenes like that were commonplace here, but still... Why was Vox being so naive?

Vox lowered his voice. “He saw your silhouette and thought you still had control over your powers, even when he was drugging you.”

Alastor frowned. “I can’t control when it comes out-”

“Yes, but he doesn’t *know* that,” Vox said softly, rubbing soothing circles over Alastor’s knuckles with his thumbs. “He was panicking just as much as you were. He figured if he ran at that point, you’d easily catch him, so he tried to take things a step further. He was trying to distract you enough to lose command of your silhouette so that he could *escape*.”

“I don’t *have* command of my silhouette,” Alastor growled quietly. “It was projecting how I felt. It wasn’t trying to attack.”

“But he didn’t know that,” Vox said again. “You attacked him first-”

“Because of what he did to you!”

“And that was sweet of you, and I love how protective you are, but maybe... maybe this time we got it wrong?” Vox offered gently. “I had lunch with him a couple of days ago and-”

“You *what*?”

“-*and* he made some valid points. He’s exploited because of his saliva, he’s exploited because of his body, he’s got no real way of defending himself apart from his guns, his producer’s a *shithead*...” Vox shrugged. “I just... I get it, y’know? Being treated like crap because of the way you look. I see a little of myself in him, I suppose. He’s ambitious. He’s trying to crawl his way up the ranks even though people keep dragging him back down. He’s a fighter, like you and me.” Vox paused, catching Alastor’s gaze. “You were wary about trusting me too, but I think the risk paid off...?”

Alastor remained quiet.

“I think there’s potential in him,” Vox continued before he pulled a face. “Look, I’m not asking you to take him under your wing or anything. I’ve got no intention of letting him get *that* close - I’m not an idiot. This is Hell and he’s still an Overlord with an impressive ability, one that could cause some serious problems if he’s smart enough. I’m just asking you to let him go and not try to kill him every time we cross paths.”

With a dawning sense of horror, Alastor realised that his resolve was wavering. *Damn it, Vox...*

Vox must have noticed the flicker of resignation in his gaze because he grinned lopsidedly. “Let him go? Give him a chance to follow his ambitions?”

“You realise that would make him our rival?” Alastor asked drily, even as his shadows eased their grip slightly on the curious Valentino.

“Another one to add to our ever-expanding collection,” Vox grinned.

With a sigh, Alastor recalled his shadows. His silhouette pouted, crossing its arms unhappily before sinking into dormancy at Alastor’s feet.

Vox squeezed his hands and glanced over at Valentino. The moth-demon rubbed his bruised wrists and slunk over to them cautiously, eyes on Alastor. One of Alastor’s ears turned to him, alert, as he side-eyed Valentino in distaste.

“I... uh... Thank you,” Valentino finally settled on. “For... not killing me. It would have been a *bitch* coming back as a regular sinner if Eros found me regenerating...”

Alastor blinked slowly at him, like a cat deliberating over whether it should eat the canary it had just caught. “Put your hands or your tongue anywhere near me and I’ll start pulling fingernails.”

Valentino's eyes widened a fraction and he shuffled an inch towards Vox. His gaze caught on Alastor and Vox's linked hands and he smiled warily. "Ah, so you *are* his beau!"

Vox's screen tinted pink and he looked to Alastor in confusion. Alastor straightened, sliding his hands out of Vox's grip and settling them on his lap.

"No," he growled. *I might have been if you hadn't interrupted*, he thought irritably.

Vox's shoulders sagged and he clasped his hands together before flashing Valentino a patient smile. "What, uh... What brings you here, Val?"

Val? So, they were on nicknaming terms now? Alastor grit his teeth in a dangerous smile.

"That is an *excellent* question, Val. Why are you here?" *And when are you leaving?*

"I'm waiting for a client," Valentino said, waving his hand dismissively. "They're going to be late so I thought I'd grab a juice. They can take as *long* as they want - I get paid by the hour from the agreed meeting time." His gaze flicked longingly to the coffee maker. "Would have preferred another one of those lattes but clients don't tend to appreciate coffee breath."

Alastor couldn't have cared any less about Valentino's *clients* if he had tried.

Suddenly, Valentino's expression brightened. "But, hey, at least I have company now!"

Alastor's fingers bit bruises into his legs as Valentino grabbed a chair from a nearby table and dragged it over, straddling it backwards so that he could lean his lanky frame on the backrest and prop his head on top of his arms.

"So, what were you guys talking about? You two looked all *smiley* when I interrupted; any interesting gossip?"

Vox's mouth opened and closed again and he sent Alastor a look that was a cross between wariness and desperation. Alastor bared his teeth at Valentino in a deadly grin, like how a wolf looked at a hunter that was aiming a gun between its eyes.

"Uh," said Vox, eloquently.

"We were discussing my fascination with lepidoptery, more precisely, the various uses for entomological pins," Alastor drawled.

Valentino's eyes widened.

"He's joking," Vox said with a reassuring smile.

"He's not."

Vox glanced at Alastor sharply and Alastor grinned back innocently. Valentino looked between them both. "...Did I interrupt something important?"

"Sharp as a bowling ball and twice as dense," Alastor said, smile tight.

"...Bowling ball?" Valentino echoed with a thoughtful frown.

"I've neither the time nor the crayons to explain it to you."

"Alastor," Vox hissed before composing himself and plastering on his best business smile. "We were just chatting. It can... wait." He sent Alastor an apologetic glance and irritation flared in Alastor's stomach as he glowered at Valentino.

Valentino caught his expression and his antennae drooped comically. He drummed his long fingers on the back of his chair before frowning at Alastor. “You don’t like me very much...”

“And that room temperature IQ strikes again. Tell me, do you eat soup with a fork?”

Vox kicked Alastor’s foot under the table, which was a silly thing to do considering the fact that Alastor had *hooves*.

Valentino crossed his lower pair of arms. “If anything, I should be the one upset with you. You ripped my wings off.”

“And you rammed your vile tongue down my throat,” Alastor growled, every muscle in his body tensing as his antlers threatened to elongate. “You’re lucky I didn’t rip your antennae off and fashion them into ink quills.”

Vox looked ready to scold Alastor again, but Valentino puffed his chest out and grit his teeth and suddenly, Vox’s attention shifted to Valentino, his expression wary. The air thickened with both of their static and Alastor felt a vicious sense of satisfaction when Vox’s frequency resonated in tune with his - a subtle show of solidarity. If Valentino made one wrong move, Alastor knew that Vox had his back.

Suddenly, Valentino huffed and let his head drop onto the back of the chair. He waved a hand theatrically. “*Relax*. I’m not stupid enough to fight both of you. I barely escaped fighting *one* of you and I can’t say I remained particularly intact.” He narrowed a glare at Alastor. “You’re an asshole, by the way.”

“The *only* reason I haven’t strangled you with your own intestines yet is because Vox, very nicely, asked me not to.”

He ignored Vox’s quiet sigh.

Valentino scowled and stood. “I can tell when I’m not welcome,” he said, archly.

Alastor chuckled, dark and sharp. “If you could do that, my repulsive fellow, you would never have walked into this café in the first place.”

Valentino clenched his fists before flipping Alastor off and stalking away.

They watched him exit the café and Alastor’s fingers uncurled from his thighs. His jaw ached from how tightly he was clenching it and he had to physically force his muscles to unknot themselves.

“He’s right, y’know,” Vox said with a frown. “You are an asshole.”

Alastor bristled and anger blossomed in his chest, hurt threading through the mix.

“Fine, side with him,” Alastor snapped, making Vox recoil and it occurred to Alastor that he might have said that a little too forcefully. He averted his gaze, grinding his teeth as he tried to ignore the betrayal sinking its claws into his heart.

Vox was quiet for a few moments before sliding a hand slowly across the table. Alastor ignored it and refused to feel an ounce of guilt at the flash of hurt that passed over Vox’s screen.

“...Al... I would *never* side with someone else over you,” Vox said softly.

“Don’t coddle me. I’m not a child,” Alastor hissed and Vox reared backwards, scowling.

“Well, you’re damn well acting like one!”

“Forgive me. Perhaps I should fetch Valentino back? He’s clearly better company than I am,” Alastor sniped, leaning away from Vox.

“What is *wrong* with you?”

Alastor’s smile pulled taut. “It seems I’ve lost my appetite.” He stood, surprising Vox, and he prowled out of the café with anger simmering low in his gut. He heard Vox scuttle after him.

“Why are you being such a dick?” Vox demanded.

Deep down in the recesses of his subconscious, Alastor was aware that he was perhaps being overly harsh with Vox, but he couldn’t help but feel betrayed. Regardless of the reasons behind it, Valentino had been ready to touch him, to grope him, to slide his filthy hands into Alastor’s trousers and- and-

He clenched his fists. And Vox had *defended* the bastard. He whirled on Vox quickly.

“You knew how I felt about him,” Alastor snarled, forcing Vox to come to an abrupt halt. “I told you what he did, what he planned on doing. He drugged us both, but he was willing to-” Alastor cut himself off abruptly and closed his eyes, jaw grinding. “And you *stood up* for him.”

Vox was still frowning, but his arms had fallen to his sides limply. “It was a shitty situation for everyone. Do you think he likes having to suck face with his enemies just so they don’t kill him? Cut the guy a little slack, Al. Hell’s hellish for everyone but Valentino’s whole defence strategy revolves around hoping that his opponents want to *rape* him more than they want to kill him.”

Alastor froze, a lump forming in his throat. Why did this keep happening? Why did those he loved always blame *him* when he was the victim? Harriet had done the same thing the moment she had found out. He remembered the disappointment in her tone - the same disappointment that was now in Vox’s. He remembered the way she had frowned at him, just like Vox was doing. He remembered the way she had abandoned him...

Alastor hated walking home in the dark. He hated the shadows and the things that could be lurking in them. He flinched at every rustle, every crack, every thud, and he wished that he wasn't alone.

It was pathetic, he knew. A twenty-four year old man afraid of walking home from work alone was a sorry state of affairs, but the darkness sent his imagination running wild and the memories of that terrible night came rushing back to him. He could feel their hands all over his body, tugging at his clothes, pinning him down, hurting him, groping him, their smirks wide and vicious...

He wrapped his arms around himself and walked a little faster. A wave of relief washed over him when he made it inside the sanctity of his home.

He stumbled over a suitcase.

He straightened and blinked at the suitcases and cardboard boxes congregating in the hallway. The stairs creaked and he looked up to find Harriet frowning at him from halfway up the staircase. She was wearing her winter coat - the green one that matched her eyes and complemented her golden hair.

Alastor glanced around the boxes and cases once more. "...Harriet, darling? What is all this?" He knew the answer even as he asked the question. He couldn't understand why though. They were getting married in the spring and they had been living together for a couple of years now, trying to save money for the wedding. Alastor loved her dearly and he had been so certain that the feeling was mutual.

"I'm leaving," she said and her tone was firm and cold.

Alastor stared at her as though she was speaking in a foreign language. "...May I ask for how long?"

"Forever."

He swallowed, feeling the remaining pillars of his life crack and crumble and fall towards those that were already in ruins. "May I ask where you are going?"

"I would rather you didn't."

He almost shivered at her icy expression. He tried to hold himself together, to stay strong like society expected of him, like she expected of him.

"Why?" he asked, voice cracking and he restrained a flinch when she pursed her lips in obvious distaste.

"I can't do this anymore, Alastor."

Alastor flicked his gaze around the house. "We've built a life together. Is this not what you wanted? Have I not always put your happiness first? Have I not strived to give you everything you deserved? If there is something I've done wrong, can we discuss it before taking such drastic measures? I would move Heaven and Earth to keep you happy, my dear. Please, let's sit down and-"

"I can't be with a man who has touched other men."

Alastor fell silent, veins turning to ice. He couldn't find any words to respond and Harriet's gaze was hard, her chin lifted in defiance, daring Alastor to argue.

"I cannot kiss you, knowing where your mouth has been. I cannot hold your hand, knowing what your fingers have been used for. I cannot gaze upon your intimate areas, knowing that other men have been inside you. I cannot touch your skin, knowing that you have been soiled by their pleasure."

Alastor flinched, lowering his gaze as shame burned his cheeks.

“Not that you have even attempted to touch me these last few months,” she said coolly.

Anger and frustration and humiliation gripped Alastor’s chest. “I didn’t ask to be raped!” he snarled, startling her. She quickly narrowed her gaze.

“I’m not heartless, Alastor. I pity you. I understand that it wasn’t an ideal situation. That you no more asked for it than your mother or father asked for death. Unfortunately, the fact of the matter is that it happened and you are not the man I fell in love with. You are broken, Alastor. Broken in ways that I, nor anyone else can fix.”

Alastor stared at her, wounded. “It has only been six months. I thought you loved me? After all our years of courtship, will you not give me time to work through my issues? Will you not stay by my side when- when I need you most?”

She looked pained and she slid her engagement ring off her finger as she descended the stairs. “It isn’t fair of you to ask me that.” She placed the ring on the small table beside the door and she retrieved her gloves from her pocket. “I cannot make you clean or whole again. I don’t want to marry a weak man who cannot bring himself to touch me, nor do I want to marry a damaged man whose sense of pleasure has been perverted.”

Alastor’s gaze snapped up to her, shocked and confused.

Her expression was rife with distaste. “You said yourself that their touches excited you, that you derived pleasure during the experience. How am I supposed to stay with you, knowing that?”

Alastor’s throat dried up, words dying before they could reach his tongue.

She picked up a suitcase and her handbag. “The cab driver will help me with my luggage. He’ll arrive shortly.”

Alastor stared at her for a long moment. “I thought you loved me?”

"I used to."

Alastor felt his own heart shatter and his knees threatened to buckle. Anxiety gripped his stomach and for a moment, he felt nauseous. He had lost everything; his family, his dignity, his lover...

"You can't... You can't just leave me," he whispered. "I- I can get better. I can be the man I was, the man you want me to be. Please, Harriet. Please, don't leave. Let me prove myself to you." He reached out to her and she stepped away, shaking her head.

"You're being quite unreasonable."

"Unreasonable?" he echoed, his anger rising. "I was raped, my parents are both dead, my life was destroyed in one night, and now you're telling me that you are leaving. I have offered to push my trauma aside to keep you happy. How am I the one being unreasonable?"

Harriet grimaced. "I do wish you wouldn't use that vulgar word."

His anger melted into something hollow and gaping. Numb. "Nothing I say will change your mind."

"No," she agreed.

His eyes slipped closed. "I see," he said quietly. "Then I bid you a goodnight and hope you find what you are looking for elsewhere." He strode past her, heading upstairs.

She didn't bother trying to stop him.

“Al?”

There was a hand on his arm - large and strong enough for Alastor to recognise it as belonging to a man. He jerked away violently and then the hand reached for his shoulder instead.

With a snarl, he lashed out. He threw his assailant against the wall of the café and pinned him there, teeth bared, and when Vox blinked at him in surprise, Alastor paused.

Vox frowned, fingers reaching slowly for Alastor’s cheek, but Alastor tore away from him with a growl and continued down the street, ignoring Vox’s wounded look.

“Alastor,” Vox called, jogging after him. “Talk to me. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Alastor took a left down an empty side street that weaved between the backs of some small houses. Vox caught up to him, reaching for his shoulder.

Alastor whirled around and gripped his wrists with a growl and Vox straightened, eyes wide. “Do not treat me as though I’m the one being unreasonable,” Alastor growled. “I made my feelings about Valentino quite clear, I fought him *for you*, and yet you went behind my back and fell for his sob story. You’ve made me look like a fool, Vox. Everything we shared that night, everything I *trusted* you with... all for *nothing*.”

He released Vox’s wrists and the Television Demon scowled at him.

“I didn’t *ask* you to fight him. You just took off without a word. All of that could have been avoided if you hadn’t gone for his blood.” He clenched his fists, tilting his head up. “And what’s that supposed to mean? *It was all for nothing*? Twenty years of friendship means *nothing* to you? Are you telling me that *Valentino* is the only reason you let me hold you that night? Are you saying you wouldn’t trust me if Valentino hadn’t forced you to?”

Alastor's muscles throbbed from how tightly they were coiled. Vox didn't understand. He didn't have all the details, he didn't *know* why this was so important to Alastor, why it felt like a betrayal.

"I-" he began before clamping his mouth shut as his thoughts rolled to Harriet. She was a lot like Vox; ambitious, strong-willed, frighteningly clever... If Vox was defending Valentino, perhaps he would share the same views as Harriet? Perhaps if Alastor revealed what had happened to him, Vox would think him weak and broken too.

His battered heart groaned in protest, threatening to crack further and Alastor's nails bit into his palms.

"You're right," Alastor said coldly. "I'm clearly being unfair to Valentino." He turned on his heel.

Vox's fingers closed around his arm. "Al, wait."

Alastor jerked away from him. "Don't touch me," he snapped, watching as Vox *flinched* and slowly recoiled his hand. His gaze filled with hurt and his shoulders hunched a fraction and he seemed to lose his voice for a moment.

Alastor's ears lowered.

"Please talk to me," Vox said and his voice was small and quiet. "Please don't walk away."

Alastor stared at Vox for a long moment before he turned his back on the Television Demon. "You've already made up your mind. There's nothing to talk about."

He strode down the street, leaving Vox standing alone, one hand outstretched.

That evening, guilt gnawed at the pit of Alastor's stomach. He'd had time to cool off, time to *think*, and he had realised that his argument with Vox might have been clouded by his memory of Harriet.

He had been quite sharp with Vox, unfairly so.

Sometimes that picturebox's heart was too soft for its own good. How he had ever earned a place in Hell, Alastor would never understand.

He glanced around his house and felt, in that moment, that he would rather not be alone, so he stepped into the shadows at the edges of the room and appeared in Vox's living room.

Vox startled, springing off the couch and spilling what appeared to be whisky all over his sweater. Alastor watched his expression brighten as he reached out a hand, but then the expression dimmed, becoming uncertain and vulnerable as he dropped his arm.

He didn't look very much like the powerful Overlord Alastor knew him to be, and the Radio Demon's chest ached. He had caused this.

"It has occurred to me that I might have overreacted earlier," Alastor said quietly and he watched Vox's shoulders tense again, his fingers curling tightly into his trousers with the urge to touch. Alastor frowned, guilt exploding through his chest. "And in doing so, I might have hurt you, which is the last thing I would ever want."

"I probably deserve it," Vox mumbled. "I don't think I listened to you very well. I saw how he affected you that night. I shouldn't have expected you to suddenly dismiss all that. I shouldn't have let him sit down with us." He wouldn't meet Alastor's gaze.

"You didn't *let* him do anything," Alastor murmured as he slowly approached Vox. "You can't control what other people do and think."

Vox grimaced. "I'm sorry, Al. I should have paid more attention."

Alastor's smile was closed-lipped and small and wrought with regret. "As should I," he said softly, touching two fingers to Vox's wrist and watching his hand uncurl from clutching the fabric of his trousers.

For a moment, Vox looked startled, then his gaze turned hopeful and he carefully caught Alastor's hand, brushing his thumb over his knuckles. They stared at their joined hands for a moment.

"He makes you uncomfortable," Vox said, squeezing Alastor's fingers gently. "You won't have to see him again. I promise."

Tension eased from Alastor's shoulders and he found a genuine smile touching his lips. How wrong he had been to compare this understanding, compassionate man to his ex-fiancée.

Perhaps now wasn't the time to confess his thoughts and desires to Vox - better to let the excitement of the day settle and focus on letting Vox see that Alastor regretted snapping at him, regretted how he had rejected Vox's touch when the Television Demon was already insecure about such things. But Alastor *would* talk with Vox soon. He would make this man *his*.

"Can I...?" Vox asked, tone uncertain and head bowed a fraction, submissive and unthreatening. His free hand fluttered in the space between them and Alastor huffed in amusement and closed the distance, letting his forehead tip against the top of Vox's screen. He sent a pulse of reassuring static between them and Vox's shoulders slumped with relief as he curled his fingers into Alastor's lapel.

"Sorry," Vox mumbled, ashamed and Alastor frowned and raised his spare hand to the back of Vox's neck, letting it settle there possessively as he pulsed another wave of charge between them.

Vox exhaled shakily. "I hate it when we argue," he admitted. "Hate knowing I've upset you."

Alastor squeezed Vox's neck lightly. "We always fix things in the end." He smirked. "You know too many of my secrets for me to hold a grudge."

Vox huffed a laugh and let his eyes slip shut as he released Alastor's lapel in favour of winding his arm loosely around Alastor's back. Alastor's smile dimmed a fraction. He must have taken their argument rather hard if he was getting this handsy.

Suddenly, Vox pulled back, smile rosy and smile a tad forced. "I'm being a terrible host. Would you like a drink? Tea, coffee, cocoa?" He glanced at the bottle of whisky on the coffee table. "Uh, something stronger?"

"Tea would be lovely," Alastor said and he followed Vox into the kitchen, watching the Television Demon search for the teapot Alastor had insisted he needed for a 'proper cup of tea'. He found it and set about brewing the pot and once he had finished pouring Alastor a cup, the Radio Demon slid behind him and snaked his arms around his middle.

Vox froze, muscles taut.

"Relax," Alastor whispered against the back of his boxy head and Vox braced himself against the countertop, breaths shaky.

"I'm sorry," Vox whispered again after a moment, tone dripping with humiliation.

"You keep saying that," Alastor drawled, "and for the afterlife of me, I can't figure out *why*."

"What sort of demon gets this pathetic over someone not letting them hold their hand?" Vox asked, laughing weakly. "I'm supposed to be an Overlord. Can you imagine Zestial or Carmilla Carmine being this pitiful?"

Now there was a thought. Sinners tended to set themselves on fire before getting within hand-holding distance of Zestial and Alastor couldn't imagine anyone wanting to take their chances with the blades on Carmilla's feet by daring to reach for one of her oversized hands.

Alastor hummed in amusement. "Perhaps. But I'd much rather indulge in your company than theirs, old pal." He leaned his head against the back of Vox's screen and resisted the urge to brush his lips over the few ports there.

He felt Vox relax, inch by inch in his arms. He held Vox for a few minutes, until he was sure the Television Demon was sufficiently reassured that Alastor welcomed his (and *only* his) touch. It took him a moment to realise that he was practically draped over Vox's back, somehow having melted against him without realising it. He relished Vox's warmth for a few seconds, smiling against the back of his screen when Vox's hands slid over his, holding Alastor against him wordlessly.

"Did you know it only takes three murders to be considered a serial killer?" Alastor asked quietly, a frown pinching his brows as his mind wandered.

Vox waited for him to continue and when it was clear that he wouldn't, he tilted his head slightly. "Is that how many lives you took?"

Alastor nodded slowly.

"What did they do?" Vox asked curiously. It wasn't something Alastor often talked about. He used his reputation as a serial killer to his advantage in Hell, but it wasn't something he discussed seriously. No one needed to know the grizzly details.

Except Vox. Alastor thought he might like Vox to know the story.

He could trust Vox. He could be honest with Vox.

“Terrible things,” Alastor murmured. “They knew each other. They were quite... evil.” It was easier talking to the back of Vox’s head; it helped him to focus on something other than those expressive digital eyes.

Vox rubbed his hands slowly. “They hurt you?” he asked in a breathy whisper.

Alastor suddenly found himself choking on his own words. He opened his mouth and closed it again before burying his face in the back of Vox’s neck.

“I lost both of my parents to them,” he murmured and he revealed nothing else. The bile crawling up his throat wouldn’t let him. His fingers started to curl against Vox’s sweater but didn’t get very far before Vox was whirling around and settling his hands on Alastor’s hips and pulling him against his front.

Alastor’s hands slid slowly up Vox’s chest, focusing on the wool of his sweater and the comforting weight of Vox’s palms on his hips. Vox had a magical ability to make him feel *safe*.

Alastor licked his lips after a moment and lifted his gaze to Vox’s concerned expression.

“I was a *good* man,” Alastor breathed, his voice cracking. “Before that night, I... I had a great life. I had a good relationship with both of my parents, I was in love with my highschool sweetheart and we were planning on getting married the following year, I enjoyed my job as a radio host...” His ears flattened and he dropped his gaze, teeth grinding. “And they destroyed *everything*.”

Vox rubbed soothing circles into his waist with his thumbs. He listened attentively, his entire presence reassuring to Alastor as he pushed on.

“They had attempted to harass my mother on her shopping trip earlier in the week. They hadn’t expected my father to be accompanying her and he had humiliated them publicly. When they broke into my parents’ house, they were drunk and angry. *Deranged*. I was upstairs when the first shot rang out. I made it to the top of the stairs in time to see the second shot hit my mother between the eyes.”

Alastor paused, shuddering at the memory of his mother collapsing in an ungraceful heap on the living room floor, crimson liquid pooling quickly around her skull. It took him a moment to collect himself and he was grateful when Vox remained quiet, ever supportive.

“They caught me staring,” Alastor whispered. “They chased me into my old bedroom. I escaped through the window and ran into the forest behind our house. They came after me and-” He cut himself off, words drying up as his stomach rolled and hot panic flared in his chest.

...He couldn't. He couldn't relive the next part. He wasn't ready. Not after everything that had already happened today.

“My father came home,” Alastor managed. “He had been meeting an old friend at the bar. There was an axe in his truck and he fought them with it. He told me to run, so I did. I... I was a coward. I shouldn't have left him.”

His breath hitched when Vox's palm cupped his cheek and he lifted his gaze to Vox's face once more. Vox smiled sadly and swept away a stray tear Alastor hadn't noticed was there.

“I returned after an hour,” Alastor continued, leaning into Vox's palm. “I found my father with an axe in his chest and bullet holes in his face and stomach.”

Vox's thumb brushed over his cheek as his fingers tangled into his hair, grounding in a way that stole the air from Alastor's lungs. He pressed up against Vox, suddenly needing to be close to the man he loved so dearly, and Vox immediately wound his other arm tightly around Alastor's waist, holding him flush against him.

Alastor clutched at Vox's sweater with one hand as the other curved over his shoulder and Vox's static popped and crackled around them, enraged and protective.

“Tell me you made their deaths slow and agonising,” Vox growled and Alastor nodded.

“The police were incompetent. It took me nine years to track them all down,” Alastor hissed between gritted teeth. “And the third death was when I got caught - by a *hunter*, of all people - so I didn’t exactly get much time to admire my work...”

Vox raised his eyebrows in surprise and Alastor smiled bitterly. “It’s hard to look innocent when you’re putting someone’s decapitated head in a sack beside a fast-moving river. I barely had time to see him raise his rifle.”

“...And then you woke up down here,” Vox said slowly, still stroking Alastor’s cheek with his thumb.

“Hardly surprising I suppose,” Alastor muttered. “My life... spiralled. I lost my parents, then my fiancée left me, the people I thought were my friends stopped associating with me... I became isolated. The only thing that stayed constant was my job, but I hated the way everyone there looked at me, with pity and *disgust*.”

Vox frowned but Alastor ignored it. “I was... shamefully afraid. Miserable. I killed those monsters to prove to myself that I could, that I wasn’t as damaged and *weak* as everyone seemed to think I was. Then I ended up in Hell and... well... the things that lurk in the shadows down here are much worse than anything on Earth. I struck a deal for more power because I thought it would protect me...”

Vox’s eyes widened. “...The bookshop?”

Alastor nodded but didn’t elaborate. “Except that backfired of course, and it looked as though I was setting up for an eternity of misery and damnation.” Alastor caught Vox’s gaze. “...Until I met you.”

A smile swept slowly across Vox’s face. “Sap.”

“I mean it,” Alastor said gently. “You were a beacon of light in this dark hellhole.” He tapped Vox’s glass. “And not just because you have a television screen for a face.”

Vox's smile dimmed a fraction before he suddenly tucked Alastor's head beneath what could be considered his chin. Alastor stilled, confused for a moment, but Vox rubbed his back comfortingly and tangled his fingers in his hair and Alastor found himself going boneless against Vox, ears lowering to accommodate for Vox's head and antlers tipped forwards to stop himself from gouging a hole in the Television Demon's casing.

"Yeah well... your smile lights up my afterlife, too," Vox whispered.

Alastor bit back a snicker. "That was *shit*."

"Screw you. That was poetic. And clever."

"John Keats would be weeping right now."

"Shut up and let me hold your fuzzy ass." Vox rubbed at the base of one of Alastor's ears and Alastor hummed and settled against him. This was quite lovely. He could get used to this.

"Did you ever find those assholes down here?" Vox asked after a while and Alastor shook his head.

"Well, I doubt they're in Heaven. Want me to help you find them? Make them suffer? I think I'd enjoy mauling them," Vox murmured.

Again, Alastor shook his head. The very thought of finding his rapists in Hell made him nauseous. On Earth, he could kill them, in Hell, it wasn't that simple. They could *regenerate*...

Still, it was nice of Vox to offer.

“I’m quite happy to leave that chapter closed,” Alastor commented, lighter than he felt.

He closed his eyes, relishing the feeling of Vox’s strong arms wrapped around him. His thoughts were drawn to Harriet and how she had always expected him to provide comfort but had rarely offered it in return. Not like this anyway, not with the air of possessiveness and affection that Vox’s embrace held.

Oh, this really was wonderful. If they weren’t standing, Alastor might have fallen asleep in an embrace so all-encompassing. He had never felt this sort of bone-deep contentment before. He had never felt this secure before.

He focused on Vox’s steady breaths, the reassuring hum of Vox’s frequency harmonising with his own, the slow thud of his heart...

He squeezed Vox tightly, earning an adoring squeeze in return.

“Let me take you out to dinner tomorrow night?” Alastor asked softly. “I’d very much like to finish our conversation from lunch.”

Excited static bounced off Alastor’s skin. “We could finish it now?” Vox suggested, failing to hide the enthusiasm from his voice.

Alastor chuckled. “Tomorrow,” he said pointedly and he pretended not to notice how Vox nuzzled into his ear. “You’ve dragged enough confessions out of me tonight.”

Vox *vibrated* with excitement. “So, there’s a confession involved?”

Alastor couldn’t fight his own grin. Clever as always. He straightened to his full height and smirked wickedly at Vox.

“Perhaps,” he purred before catching one of Vox’s hands and drawing his knuckles to his lips in a barely-there kiss.

Then he slipped out of Vox’s hold, biting back a laugh when he noticed how cherry-red his screen had become.

He stepped into a shadow at the corner of the kitchen and Vox’s eyes grew comically wide as he stumbled over his own feet in an attempt to snag the Radio Demon’s coat.

Alastor vanished into the shadows with a Cheshire Cat grin.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: homophobia and victim blaming in the italic part.

And of course, tomorrow night's dinner is going to go off without a single hitch :)

Chapter 15: The Proposal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Vox frowned at the letters of resignation spread across his desk.

Dolby had poached a significant number of his editors *and* actors, leaving Vox with filming deadlines that he would never be able to meet.

He let his head drop into his hands. *Shit.*

So, now he needed to find new staff as well as new content if he wanted to stop Dolby from overtaking his numbers. He peered through his fingers at the clipboard with the comparison of his and Dolby's statistics over the past few weeks. That gap was getting awfully narrow...

Vox sighed and stood, shuffling around his office in hopes that it might inspire a solution. He came to a halt at his large window and peered out of it, glancing at the hive of houses and businesses and industry around him. It was suffocating seeing so many dirty walls packed together; new buildings popping up every week, pressing closer and closer until Vox's view consisted only of brick and concrete and metal.

One day he would build a tower that loomed over the city - a tower with a view that would let him *breathe*.

A smile touched his lips as he let his mind wander. Perhaps his tower could have a radio station inside it, and he and Alastor could watch the city lights twinkle below as they chatted softly under the cover of darkness, sipping brandy in between teasing kisses.

Vox chuckled at his own thoughts. Alastor was turning him into a hopeless romantic and they weren't even together!

Yet.

He grinned. He was looking forward to tonight. His chest was tight with anticipation and he had felt a little breathless this morning. He had never been in love before but he decided that he liked the feeling. It was far more exciting than meaningless hook-ups and short flings. The satisfaction also lasted longer than the next morning and the fluttery nervousness in his chest was something that occurred every time Vox even *thought* about seeing Alastor, rather than being restricted to the moment before he took his clothes off for a hot stranger.

He glanced down at himself, genuine concern threading through his chest at the thought of Alastor's reaction to his naked body. It wasn't particularly conventional... What if Alastor hated it? What if it made him uncomfortable, like it did most sinners?

Vox pursed his lips. He was getting ahead of himself. Alastor was... Alastor was different. Gentle. If the Radio Demon didn't like his body, then they could find a work around. Probably.

The smile returned to his expression. Alastor had opened up to him last night and Vox couldn't be more thrilled. There were still lots of secrets to unravel and Vox was almost certain that Alastor hadn't quite revealed *everything* about the night he had lost his parents - there had been something stilted in his tone, something *haunted* in his eyes, but getting to this point was a miracle. It was a testament to how much Alastor trusted Vox, even after their argument.

And that knuckle kiss at the end! Damn tease! Not that he'd have his Radio Demon any other way. Vox chuckled to himself as he caught sight of his reflection in the window and how his pupils had taken the shape of hearts. He closed his eyes and when he next looked, the hearts had vanished. He was a mess of honeyed feelings that kept leaking out of him when he wasn't paying attention... and he *adored* it.

Who would have thought he would finally find love in *Hell*?

And with a man that hated touch, claimed to be straight, and, *wait for it...* was an actual serial killer with the sort of reputation that had other murderers crossing the street when they spotted him.

He settled back into his chair, chest filled with warm fondness for his lovely Radio Demon. Vox was a lucky man indeed to have caught Alastor's eye.

Tonight was going to be *incredible*.

Static tickled Alastor's skin and Vox could tell he was biting back a chuckle. Vox couldn't hide his enthusiasm, especially with how Alastor was holding his arm out for him to cling to. He chattered away, anticipation making him nervous in a way that Alastor seemed to find endearing. He didn't interrupt Vox at least, and listened to him prattle on about the amazing new media storage device that had become available on Earth - something called a 'floppy disk'.

They strolled to the restaurant together and Vox stole a number of glances at Alastor's contented smile, and when Alastor caught him, he merely grinned and continued talking, delighted when Alastor sent bursts of affectionate static skittering up his arm. Their frequencies thrummed in harmony and Vox realised he had never been this happy.

"You look gorgeous," Vox said after a few quiet moments wherein he admired how much Alastor had dressed up for him. He wore a black dress shirt, black slacks, a crimson waistcoat, and an inky overcoat that Vox hadn't realised he even owned, and honestly, how was Vox supposed to tear his gaze away when he looked this stunning?

Alastor's ears were upright and relaxed and his cheeks darkened a little at the compliment.

"You're looking quite handsome yourself, Picturebox," Alastor said, sneaking a glance at Vox's cyan shirt, navy waistcoat, navy slacks, and navy tailcoat.

Vox beamed, puffing his chest out a little and Alastor's smile widened as he gazed at Vox fondly.

“So, what exactly is it that you wanted to talk about?” Vox asked innocently, earning himself an amused quirk of lips and a gentle squeeze of his arm.

Vox's heart thumped loudly in his chest as the restaurant came into view.

Suddenly, a grunt caught his attention and he swivelled his head to catch sight of two entangled figures in the porch of a store front. They were clearly kissing but it looked rather uncomfortable in Vox's opinion and the taller figure seemed to be pinned by the smaller, beefier figure.

They parted for air and the taller figure looked tense, movements stilted, and Vox caught a flash of metal in the grip of the shorter figure.

Vox slowed to a halt and Alastor glanced at him curiously.

There was another grunt of discomfort from the taller figure before he was dragged into a rough kiss.

...Valentino?

Another flash of metal. Valentino stiffened as one of the shorter figure's lower arms of three pairs jerked towards him. Vox realised that Valentino had a gun pressed against his stomach.

“It isn't our business,” said Alastor quietly.

Vox's mouth drew into a thin line. “I think he's in trouble.”

“It could be one of his clients,” Alastor said with distaste.

Vox watched them a little longer, noticing that Valentino didn't seem inclined to fight back as his company trailed the muzzle of the gun across his cheek, over his chest, and down to his hip. Valentino's upper hands settled over his lover's shoulders and his lower pair roamed over his chest and stomach.

Vox turned away slowly, allowing Alastor to lead him onwards.

A shot rang out, followed by an agonised cry, and both Vox and Alastor whirled around to watch Valentino buckle, one hand springing to his bloodied hip as he shoved at his grinning lover. His eyes widened when the shorter sinner grasped his arms and wedged the gun under his jaw instead.

Valentino stilled for a moment before jerking his knee into the other sinner's crotch and tearing out of his grip. He clawed at his lover's face when a hand landed on his shoulder and he made it two steps before another shot rang out and he staggered forwards, clutching an arm.

The sinner grabbed one of the wing nubs jutting out of Valentino's back, digging his claws into the growing appendage, and Valentino hissed and reached for the knife strapped to his garter. The other sinner was quicker and pushed his weapon against Valentino's spine.

Vox surged towards them, unnoticed, and when Valentino's rough lover finally caught sight of him, he barely had time to react before Vox shoved Valentino out of the way and gripped the shorter sinner's arm. He discharged a couple of hundred volts into the sinner and watched as he was catapulted into the shop door before collapsing into a smoking heap on the ground.

With a satisfied smirk, Vox turned to Valentino, who gazed at him with wide, startled eyes and a slack jaw as he clutched at his hip and arm. Blood trickled between his fingers and Vox frowned as he approached Valentino, then paused before reaching him.

"That, uh... He didn't *pay* for that, right?" Vox asked slowly, remembering how he had interrupted Valentino's last client.

Valentino shook his head, looking a little breathless. “The ‘hostage situation’ was part of the transaction. Getting *shot* definitely wasn’t.”

Vox pulled a face and Valentino grimaced as he shifted his weight. Suddenly, his eyes grew round. “Vox!”

Vox turned in time to see the collapsed sinner raise his gun.

A shadow curled quickly around the sinner’s arm and the bullet sailed past Vox’s head. Another shadow wrapped around the sinner’s neck, snapping it cleanly, and the sinner slumped onto his side, limp and lifeless.

Vox met Alastor’s narrowed gaze and he smiled appreciatively at the Radio Demon. Alastor’s smirk was strained and he eyed Valentino warily.

Valentino hissed quietly and shifted his weight again and Vox watched blood dribble down his sleeveless arm and soak through his fishnet stockings.

The poor moth really was quite underdressed with his intricately-patterned, red body corset, thigh-high fishnet tights, and stilettos. He shivered a little and Vox’s shoulders sagged. He took off his tailcoat and handed it to Valentino and the moth-demon stared at him, bewildered. There was a noticeable size difference between them and Vox pulled a face before carefully tying the coat around Valentino’s waist to provide at least a little warmth and privacy.

Once again, Valentino looked stunned. He licked his lips, apparently lost for words, and Vox wondered if anyone had shown him any sort of decency or respect before. Considering where they were, probably not.

Vox stepped back and flicked his gaze to the bullet wound in Valentino’s arm. “You should probably get to a hospital,” Vox said before turning back to the thinly-smiling Alastor. His ears were erect, facing Valentino, and his gaze was sharp and clearly uncomfortable. Still, he allowed Vox to show a little kindness towards Valentino without complaint, which was a surprising display of restraint after yesterday.

Vox returned to Alastor's side and glanced over at Valentino one last time. He was a pitiful sight with blood dripping down his arm and leg, Vox's coat tied around his waist and body trembling as the cool evening air chilled his bare skin.

When he noticed Vox's expression, Valentino wrapped his lower arms around himself as he plastered on a smirk.

"Gracias, amorcito," he drawled as he tipped his head a fraction. "I don't meet many gentlemen in my line of business, but you are a *pleasure*. Enjoy the rest of your evening."

He turned around and Vox watched him limp away, an uneasy feeling settling in his stomach. He caught Alastor's gaze.

Alastor's shoulders sagged. "Vox..."

"Look at him, Al," Vox murmured as he flicked his gaze back to Valentino. He leaned heavily on his right leg, antennae lowered in pain.

"Remember what we talked about yesterday?" Alastor reminded. "He isn't our responsibility, nor is it wise for us to get too close to him knowing what he's capable of. He's still a dangerous Overlord."

Vox watched Valentino's shoulders hunch with agony. He sighed. "No, you're right. I shouldn't let my guard down just because I feel sorry for the guy. Come on. Our reservation is waiting."

They continued their way to the restaurant and Vox hoped that Valentino wouldn't face any further attacks from bloodthirsty demons. He hoped that no one would see him wounded with all of that bare skin and that enticing outfit and consider it an invitation to take advantage of him in the middle of the street.

Perhaps they should have escorted him home? It wasn't as though Valentino was in any fit state to fight either of them anyway, even if he wanted to.

He frowned. He was being ridiculous. He barely knew the moth-demon. And it wasn't fair to Alastor when the Radio Demon was so disturbed by Valentino's presence. Vox was under no obligation to help Valentino, no obligation to give him a chance. It wasn't his fault that Valentino had obviously been used and abused in both life and afterlife. It wasn't his fault that Valentino hadn't been shown any kindness, that no one treated him with compassion or dignity. It wasn't his fault that no one had any affectionate words for Valentino, that no one offered him a comforting touch.

It wasn't his fault that Valentino hadn't been as lucky as he had by finding something as impossible as *love* in Hell. It wasn't his fault that Valentino didn't have an Alastor in his life and he certainly didn't need to feel *guilty* about it.

Alastor heaved a sigh and Vox startled, turning to find Alastor side-eying him unhappily.

"You're not going to stop thinking about him, are you?"

Vox ducked his head with a grimace. "No, you're right. He's a big boy. He can handle himself. That was just a one-time ass-saving."

Alastor came to a halt and stared at Vox, unimpressed. "You're worried about him."

Vox dropped his gaze. "...You saw what he was wearing and how he was limping. There are a lot of assholes down here."

Alastor frowned for a moment, ears flattening briefly and jaw clenching before he tossed a glance at the restaurant. "I'll cancel the reservation."

Vox straightened in surprise. "You don't have to-"

“It’s going to bother you if we don’t help him,” Alastor interrupted before he gestured down the street. “After you, my dear.”

Vox beamed and for one careless moment, considered kissing Alastor to show his appreciation for the man’s willingness to sacrifice his own comfort for Vox’s. He barely managed to restrain himself and settled for taking Alastor’s arm instead and practically dragging him down the street.

They caught up to the moth-demon quickly and found him growling at a large, ugly rhino-like demon that had shoved him against a street lamp. Vox narrowed his eyes with a smirk and heard the beginning of Alastor’s quiet chuckle as he zipped into the nearest streetlamp and appeared behind the rhino-demon with a wicked grin.

He leaned on his toes and dug his claws into the bulky sinner’s shoulders. “Y’know, I think there’s a real *spark* between you two.”

The sinner whirled around with a snarl and the moment he released Valentino, Vox gave him a hefty shock. The other demon staggered and Vox’s grin grew wider. “Where are you going? Things are just starting to *heat up*.” He gripped the other demon’s wrist and shocked him again and the rhino-like sinner yelped and skittered backwards.

He knocked into Alastor, who smiled mildly at him, and the sinner lost all colour in his face.

“Shit!”

He took off running down the street and Alastor brushed imaginary dust off the part of his coat that the sinner had touched.

Vox turned to Valentino with a smirk and a teasing wink. “We’re stalking you until you make it home.”

Valentino gaped at him for a few seconds before a genuine grin touched his lips. “Perhaps I don’t want you finding out where I live.”

Vox jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Would you prefer the rhino to follow you home instead?”

Valentino’s eyes crinkled with amusement before his gaze slid past Vox’s shoulder to Alastor, and his smile dimmed a fraction. Alastor blinked at him slowly, silent as he clasped his hands behind his back and made no move to approach Valentino.

Before the tension could sour the air, Vox gestured down the street with an extravagant wave. “Think of us as your personal bodyguards.”

“I don’t need bodyguards,” Valentino said quietly, gaze still fixed on Alastor.

“Then consider us your babysitters,” Alastor said coolly and Valentino frowned, fists clenching.

Vox touched Valentino’s arm to gain his attention and the moth-demon whipped around to face him, teeth bared for a moment before he blinked and relaxed, the small smile returning to his face.

“Lead the way,” Vox said, noting how Alastor lingered behind them, likely to keep an eye on Valentino as well as any other potential threats.

Vox could be quite the chatterbox when he wanted to be and it came in handy in situations like this where he needed to diffuse tension, so he talked about inconsequential matters and asked Valentino about the pretty corset he was wearing and how the rest of his day had been and whether he had anyone waiting at home.

Valentino scoffed and said the only people that ever waited to see him were his clients.

Vox's chest ached with sympathy and he stole a glance over his shoulder at Alastor. He remembered being that lonely, when he had bar and club-hopped in the evenings, going home with strangers just to feel as though he was wanted. He hadn't done that in over five years.

They arrived at a decent-sized house with a rather beautiful garden filled with roses and marigolds and pansies and other vivaciously-coloured flowers and shrubs that Vox didn't know the names of. Vox and Alastor glanced around the landscaped garden, surprised.

"I like flowers," Valentino explained as he limped to his door. He paused before entering and turned to Vox, gaze soft. "Thank you for all your help tonight."

Vox tore his gaze away from the white roses he had been admiring. "You're very welcome. You gonna be okay with those wounds or do you need a hand?" It wasn't really his place to offer - Valentino *was* a rival Overlord - but he seemed genuinely grateful and Vox knew from experience that it was difficult to remove a bullet from one's own body.

Valentino blinked, clearly startled by the offer, and his gaze drifted past Vox to Alastor. "I can handle it myself."

Vox shrugged and turned away, leaning over briefly to inspect a gorgeous bush of pink roses.

"...Would either of you like to come in for a drink?" Valentino called after a moment.

Vox glanced at the moth-demon. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, looking almost nervous.

"I don't often get company that doesn't want me to... service them in some way," Valentino said quietly.

Sympathy welled inside Vox's chest as he straightened. "I could go for a drink," he said, smiling, before glancing back at Alastor. "What about you, Al?"

There was a small pause before Alastor tipped his head with a wary smile. "I suppose I am a little parched."

Vox grinned at him, pleased. He was trying.

Valentino brightened and gestured for them to follow him. Vox walked further up the path, brushing his fingers against the rose heads as he did so, relishing the silky texture of the petals. Gardens as pretty as Valentino's were rare in Hell.

Alastor shuffled up behind him, voice low. "Careful, my dear. Sometimes the sweetest roses have the sharpest thorns."

Vox's easy smile remained. "And sometimes the thickest brambles bear the most fruit."

Alastor fell quiet.

Vox grimaced as his finger caught a thorn hidden beneath a red rose. He thrust his finger into his mouth and hoped Alastor hadn't noticed.

They entered Valentino's home and looked around the soft, plush furnishings. The place seemed comfortable, if a little risqué with its suggestive reds and purples. Alastor pulled a disdainful expression but Vox didn't mind the aesthetic.

Valentino popped open a bottle of fine brandy and poured them each a glass before he grimaced and attempted to work the bullets free of his arm and hip. After a round of cursing and pained grunting, he dropped both bullets into the bin.

“Y’know,” Valentino muttered as he put pressure on his hip, attempting to stem the fresh wave of blood, “I’m so used to people down here thinking with their dicks and pussies that I forget some people have brains.” He frowned at Vox apologetically. “I really am sorry about last week. You aren’t what I expected.”

Vox leaned against the door frame to the kitchen and smiled lop-sidedly. Valentino shifted his gaze to Alastor, who lingered behind in the living room, brows tilting downwards.

“You too, Alastor,” Valentino offered quietly. “I did what I did out of self-defence, but I can’t blame you for defending Vox.” He paused, stealing a glance at Vox. “...He’s certainly worth the effort.”

Vox smiled. That was a surprisingly nice thing for Valentino to say considering they barely knew each other - and considering their disastrous first meeting.

Alastor’s smile sharpened a fraction but Valentino soon returned his gaze to the Radio Demon. “I’m sorry things have become so hostile between us. Perhaps we could start over? I’ll forget about the mutilation if you forget about the drugging and fondling?”

There was a long moment of silence before Alastor’s lips pressed into a thin line.

“Let me see that hip.”

Valentino startled when Alastor strode across the room and turned him around so he could inspect the weeping wound. He murmured a few words under his breath and the air around him was illuminated by emerald sigils, which spilled onto the floor in a language only Alastor understood. Incandescent green stitches appeared at the corners of Alastor’s smile and at first, Valentino panicked, but when the wound started knitting together, he stared in wonder.

Once the wound was healed, Alastor gripped the ruff around Valentino’s neck with one hand, dragging him closer.

“If you *ever* touch me like that again, I’ll rip out your venomous tongue and tear off every single finger, and coat them all in a sweet, honey glaze to sell in Cannibal Town.”

Valentino’s eyes widened and Alastor sent him a toothy grin before roughly whirling him around so he could peer at the wound in his arm. After another muttered chant, the wound healed, leaving a tiny silver scar as a reminder of what had once been.

Valentino stared at Alastor for a long moment as the sigils faded, along with the sutures at the corners of his mouth.

“...Thank you,” he murmured and Alastor waved a hand dismissively.

“The fresh blood was making me terribly hungry,” he drawled before sauntering into the lounge and perching delicately on the end seat of the couch with a wide grin.

Valentino swallowed and Vox restrained himself from rolling his eyes. It was always entertaining to watch Alastor peacock in front of other Overlords - sometimes the Radio Demon didn’t seem aware that he was doing so - but Valentino was hardly a match for either of them, so it was a little like watching a hunting contest between a wolf and a toy poodle.

Still, it was considerate of Alastor to heal Valentino. He rarely revealed his healing ability to anyone outside of Vox and Rosie.

“Not many demons learn that sort of magic,” Valentino said carefully as Vox joined the Radio Demon on the couch.

Alastor’s smile widened. “By fixing my enemies’ shattered bones, I can find new ways of breaking them.”

A long silence followed, wherein Vox *almost* snorted at Valentino’s round eyes. He sent a burst of playfully scolding static up Alastor’s arm, undetected by Valentino. Alastor’s ear flicked in subtle amusement.

Valentino settled into the chair beside the couch and eyed Alastor warily. “Those stitches in your mouth... They look quite painful. I assume you didn’t put them in yourself?”

Static grew thick in the air and Vox could see Alastor tensing, gaze sharpening and smile stretching into more of a snarl.

“Part of his more demonic form,” Vox lied. “Hell has a cruel sense of humour. If he’s to inflict pain on others, he must suffer some himself.”

Valentino nodded, accepting the lie and Alastor glanced at Vox as the static dissipated. Vox shot him a lop-sided smile before jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “So, how long will it take for those wings to grow back in?”

It took Valentino’s curiosity off Alastor and the conversation that followed was light and surprisingly respectful. After a couple of hours, Vox’s arm was strewn over the back of Alastor’s part of the couch, fingers itching to pet one of those fluffy ears but knowing they couldn’t whilst in company. Still, Alastor looked more relaxed than when he had first entered Valentino’s home, and Valentino didn’t look ready to pull one of his many guns on Alastor.

A phone rang obnoxiously and Valentino crossed the room, heading for a small table that held a gaudy lamp and a red rotary-dial telephone. “Excuse me,” he murmured before picking up the handpiece.

After a moment, his antennae drooped. “I know but-” A small pause. “I did, but-” He frowned and pursed his lips. “He *shot* me. *Twice*. I really don’t-” His shoulders slumped. “Yes, Eros. Si. No, I- Yes, I know he’s a good friend of yours.” A grimace. “Si, entiendo. Crystal clear. I’ll see him again tomorrow night, free of charge.” His voice grew smaller, quieter. “I’d prefer if he didn’t bring his knife collection. Where does he want me to meet him? Oh...” His eyes widened. “No, it’s fine! Todo esta bien. It’s just... There are a lot of gangs around there and- Yes, Eros. Yes, I... I’ll see you tomorrow, bright and early.”

He put the phone down gingerly, then managed a weak smile when he caught Vox and Alastor’s curious gazes. “So... Turns out my client complained about getting *assaulted*.”

Alastor pulled a face as Vox's brows pinched together unhappily. He watched as Valentino's antennae dropped lower.

"He, uh... He also complained that he didn't get value for money, which was his fault because if he hadn't *shot* me, I might have sucked his cock like he was so desperate for."

Alastor wrinkled his nose and Valentino raised an eyebrow at him for a moment before Vox piped up.

"You aren't actually gonna meet him tomorrow, are you?"

Valentino shrugged. "What choice do I have? Eros pays me. I have to do what he says."

"You could quit."

"And have Eros' goons come after me instead? He knows where I live. He doesn't let his *star performers* go so easily."

Vox drummed his fingers over his thigh as an idea began to take shape in his mind - a solution to both his and Valentino's problems.

"What if you had someone more powerful to protect you? Someone with a spare apartment you could stay in until Eros loses interest?" Vox said carefully.

Alastor's gaze snapped to him, brows pinched together and smile borderlining on a warning.

"They'd have to be a pretty powerful Overlord to rival Eros. And what idiot is going to offer protection to *another* Overlord?" Valentino scoffed and Vox stared at him for a long moment, waiting for the epiphany to strike him.

When it was clear that the lightbulbs weren't screwed in, Vox raised his hand. "This idiot."

Alastor's smile sharpened as he glared holes into the side of Vox's boxy face. Valentino blinked, mouth falling open for a fraction of a second before he shook his head. "...Why would you do that for me?"

Vox pressed his lips together and dropped his hands into his lap. "It's not out of the kindness of my cold, black heart, sorry to disappoint. I want something out of it."

Valentino narrowed his eyes and Vox shrugged. "Dolby's stealing my viewers *and* my staff. I need fresh content for my channels. I need new actors and editing staff and I need entertainment that can be produced cheaper than what I'm currently creating. No long, winding plotlines, fewer characters, shorter episodes to hold viewers' attention... I need fast-paced thrills and concise storylines."

An intrigued expression settled over Valentino's features. "So, you want me to work for you, but in what role? I mean, I can poach actors and editors from Eros if that's what you need - it's easy enough - but our talents are in porn. Unless... that's what you're asking for?"

Vox grimaced. "No. However, a little sex-appeal wouldn't hurt." His shoulders sagged a fraction, chest aching with a strange sort of nostalgic grief. "Television is changing and viewers don't seem to value quality quite so highly these days."

Valentino cocked his head to one side. "So, what? You want a little soft porn?"

Again, Vox pulled a face. "Not really. I still want a storyline but maybe with the actors showing a bit more... skin?" He felt dirty just thinking about it. Imagine... broadcasting something so scandalous on daytime television. Even if he was in Hell, he had standards, and this idea fell below all of them. Still, he needed to keep ratings up if he wanted to retain his status - and if he wanted to be able to pay his employees.

A smile tugged at Valentino's mouth. "Amorcito, if you're going to take a risk and try something new, don't hold back. If sex-appeal is the angle you're going for, then give your audience *sex*. This is Hell. *Lust* is one of the sins that earns you a place down here."

From the corner of his eye, Vox could see how stiff Alastor had grown, how straight his ears were, how wide his gaze was, how strained his smile had become...

"I don't want to be another Eros," Vox said. "Hardcore porn isn't something I want to be known for."

Valentino chuckled and it was a warm, friendly sound. "Nor does it suit you! I'm not making myself very clear. If you're looking for quality but you want it cheap, then you don't sell bizarre kinks and graphic fetishes... You sell *intimacy*. You sell the illusion of a private show for an audience of one."

Vox frowned in confusion and Valentino sent him a wicked grin before rising from his chair and fluffing the fur around his neck. He lowered his chin and peered at Vox through half-lidded eyes and gently removed the coat tied around his waist as he approached the Television Demon.

"You make your audience believe that you're talking to them, and *only* them," Valentino purred, voice soft and edging on suggestive. He tossed his glasses carelessly on the seat beside Vox. "You can start off casual and slowly build the tension."

He placed a hand on Vox's knee, using him as a support as he slipped his heels off. He squeezed Vox's knee lightly once he was finished and offered him a small, grateful smile. "You can have fun with a strip tease and you don't necessarily need to show anything juicy."

He splayed a hand over his chest and slid it slowly down his stomach, fingertips barely grazing his crotch as he allowed his eyes to flutter shut, tongue darting out to wet his lips before he opened one eye and smirked playfully. "Suggestion goes a long way for the imagination."

Vox's fans flipped on but he was unable to look away with Valentino standing so close and his smile so teasing.

"Or," Valentino murmured as he reached for Vox's hand and carefully pulled him out of his seat. "You and a partner can dance a sensuous routine. A tango might be all it takes to stoke some *heat*." He brushed his fingers over Vox's neck, feather-light, and one finger caught Vox's collarbone but Vox didn't have time to dwell on it as Valentino surged into a tango, but placed his first step between Vox's legs so that a fishnet-clad thigh nudged at his crotch.

Vox leapt backwards with round eyes and Valentino grinned before turning his back to Vox. "Perhaps a pole dance is in order? I'd say there's a lot of potential in a *thick pole*." He dropped suddenly into a squat, spreading his thighs in a surprising show of flexibility and he placed two hands on his ass and another two around an imaginary pole as he arched his back and slowly thrust his way to an upright position.

Vox swallowed, throat dry and tripped onto the couch when Valentino turned to him with a sultry expression. He prowled towards the Television Demon and straddled his lap without touching. Then, he stooped down and placed his palms against the back of the couch either side of Vox, boxing him in as he leaned close to his screen.

"I can get you your ratings, Mister Television Demon," Valentino purred. "I can put on a show and I can do it with class and elegance. I can give you *everything* you desire. I can tempt your rivals to tune into *your* channels and they can try to copy, but you'll already have the best there is." He smirked, placing a delicate finger under Vox's screen and tilting his head up. "The audience will think I'm performing for them, but we *both* know who I'm really performing for..."

Vox's screen reddened and his fans flipped onto their highest setting. He opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, pressing his thighs together shamefully as he attempted to hide the tent starting in his trousers. He needed to stop this now. Alastor was *right there* and-

Valentino stepped away from Vox with a snicker before his entire posture changed into something less erotic and more relaxed. He winked playfully and shrugged a shoulder. "See? Suggestion and intimacy *sells*. It leaves people wanting more and their imagination does the rest. If you want to put on a show, *put on a show!* Erotica and sex aren't the same thing, amorcito, and I can do *both*."

Vox swallowed and stared at Valentino for a long moment. He flicked his gaze to Alastor and his heart sank at the Radio Demon's hard scowl. His ears were lowered and his jaw was clenched and there was no mistaking the look of disapproval in his eyes as he met Vox's gaze.

Vox wanted the couch to swallow him whole.

It appeared that he wasn't the only one who noticed Alastor's simmering anger.

"...It was just an example," Valentino said quietly, tone cautious. "It isn't easy to explain in words, so I thought a demonstration would-"

Alastor's fiery gaze shifted to Valentino, silencing him. He quickly returned his attention to Vox.

Vox managed to scrape together a few words. "He has a point. It could work."

Alastor's gaze could have cut through diamonds. "May I remind you that you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar." His eyes flicked briefly to Valentino and back again - so briefly in fact, that had Vox blinked, he might have missed it.

"And sometimes," said Vox quietly after a moment, "the honey isn't a trap at all."

Alastor's smile became something more akin to a sneer. "Or perhaps *I* was the fly last night." He stood and straightened his coat. "Degrade yourself however you wish, old pal. It's your reputation, not mine." He whirled on his heel and stalked towards the door, but Vox could see how his ears were pinned back, he could feel how static prickled the air like needles against his skin.

Vox ground his teeth together, anger rising and he chased Alastor into the garden.

“Don’t you *dare*,” Vox snarled and Alastor turned, glaring at him icily. “Don’t you dare imply that I was trying to trick you. That I’ve betrayed you somehow. Twenty years of friendship should have taught you better than that.”

“Last night you promised me that we wouldn’t have to see him again,” Alastor hissed. “And today you’re offering him a job!”

“I promised *you* wouldn’t have to see him again,” Vox snapped. “You didn’t have to come here with me! You didn’t have to cancel the reservation! You didn’t have to fight that asshole off with your shadows! I didn’t force you to do any of that! You *chose* to!”

“I did it for you!” Alastor snarled. “I came here *for you*. I cancelled the reservation *for you*. I fought ‘that asshole’ to protect *you*. I healed the damn moth because I know you want me to play nice! And I do all of those things for you because I-” He cut himself off abruptly and clamped his mouth shut, fists clenching and eyes brimming with mixed emotions.

Vox scowled at him. “Say it.”

Alastor pressed his lips together.

“Go on,” Vox growled. “Finish that sentence.”

Alastor’s gaze drifted past Vox’s shoulder and Vox grit his teeth. “*Say it*, asshole.”

Alastor’s expression hardened as he met Vox’s eyes. “You know I would never do that to you. Not like this. Not in anger or frustration.”

Those words were like a punch to the gut and all the fight was sucked out of Vox.

When Vox was a young child, he had truly believed that his parents loved him. He thought that the beer bottles hurled at his head after he came home late from school were thrown out of worry. He thought that his parents hit him when he spoke back to them because they wanted to teach him how to be a polite and respectful man. Then when he grew into his teenage years, he craved affection so greatly that he didn't protest the cigarettes his father stubbed into his skin because he didn't touch him any other time, so Vox assumed that was how his father showed affection. When his mother screamed at him and slapped him, he would sometimes stare at the bruises in the mirror and convince himself that the fact that she had touched him at all meant that she must love him at least a little.

And then he grew up, and he realised that the bruises and burns weren't love at all, but his brain was already broken by then and it was hard to erase the association between violent anger and affection.

Vox's shoulders sagged and he stared at Alastor defeatedly and Alastor squared his jaw.

"You are better than this," Alastor said quietly. "You don't have to resort to cheap filth."

"Television changes so quickly," Vox sighed. "If I don't find something new, and fast, Dolby will leave me in the dirt. I won't be able to afford my own staff if I don't get the ratings - and that's if Dolby doesn't steal them from me first."

"Then let me take care of Dolby," Alastor said, frowning. "I don't understand why you keep refusing the offer."

"Because I want to prove that I'm worth the reputation I have," Vox said in exasperation. "I want to prove that I can beat him. That I don't need to *cheat*. That I don't need you holding my hand every step of the way."

Alastor recoiled, surprised. Then, he scowled, expression icy.

"I see. It looks like you and Valentino have a lot to talk about. I won't keep you any longer," Alastor said coolly before turning his back on Vox.

“Wait, Al,” Vox called as he trotted after him. “Hang on, I didn’t mean-”

Alastor melted into the shadows at the edges of the garden.

Vox stared with wide eyes at the spot he had been occupying, heart aching.

“...He’ll come back.”

Vox jumped and spun around to find Valentino hovering in the doorway, looking rather sheepish.

“And make-up sex is great,” Valentino tried to joke, but his gaze flickered with uncertainty and Vox realised the moth-demon was unsure if Vox would take his ire out on him. He and Valentino were alike in so many ways.

“We’re not together,” Vox sighed. “We never were.”

Valentino raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure?”

Vox shot him a dry look and Valentino held up his hands in surrender. “It’s just... you clearly care about him. And he cares about you. I take it neither of you have confessed your-”

“Val.”

Valentino clamped his mouth shut and rubbed at one of his arms. “...I’m not trying to make him uncomfortable. I don’t know how else to prove to him that our first meeting was a misunderstanding.”

Vox's frown softened. "I know. He can be stubborn. He doesn't trust easily - especially men - and I guess that's not the worst thing down here but it can be... frustrating at times." He shook his head before plastering on a smile he didn't feel. "He'll come around eventually, I'm sure."

Valentino offered him a grin. "I don't doubt it. He'd be a fool to let you slip through his fingers."

Vox blinked, taken off-guard by the comment. How... surprisingly sweet.

The grin slid off Valentino's face to be replaced by an expression of subdued hope. "Regarding our discussion earlier... Does your offer still stand?"

Vox gave him a tired smile and headed towards the house, gesturing inside.

"Let's chat."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry guys for the long update time - it was my birthday last week and I stayed at a theme park, so didn't have time to write! Hopefully the next update won't take so long but I've started a new job so it definitely won't be daily! Anyway, you might notice a small problem emerging in this chapter... ;)

Chapter 16: A Rose By Any Other Name

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alastor tested the handle and resisted the urge to press his forehead against the locked door.

“It has been a while since we last had a proper conversation, sweet fawn.”

“I’m not feeling very talkative,” Alastor said with a false smile, and a soft, breathy chuckle floated between the bookshelves - a voice that came from nowhere and everywhere all at once.

“Sit. Tell me about your lovely picturebox and his new friend.”

Alastor *almost* slammed his head against the door in exasperation. Instead, he widened his smile and strode over the unconscious goat-sinner in the middle of the floor. He wound his way through bookshelves and settled into a familiar armchair in the corner of the room.

He clasped his hands over his lap and his tone grew cheery and overly saccharine, as though he was conversing with a particularly excitable child. “Why, he’s just splendid! A real upstanding citizen! Honestly, can’t fault the fellow! And his fashion sense is *divine!*” A radio applause track played softly in the background.

The Voice made a sound of annoyance and Alastor tilted his head in amusement.

“Condescension doesn’t suit you, Alastor, especially when it is aimed at *me*. ”

Alastor scoffed and threw one leg carelessly over the other. “Why bother me with such dull questions when you already know the answers? You can see *everything* from your little throne room - wherever that may be - so why not skip the meaningless pleasantries and get on with whatever it is you wish to say to me, so that I may go home?”

“Very well,” said The Voice, irritation bleeding into her tone and Alastor inspected his nails despite them being hidden beneath his glove. He smirked to himself.

“You love Vox.”

“Ten out of ten for observation skills!” Alastor chirped, another round of studio applause backing his words. “Someone should promote you to detective!”

“Yet you haven’t confessed. You’re making him wait. It’s almost cruel.”

Alastor rolled his eyes. “I’m quite certain that he’s enjoying the ride. He’s rather clever, you see, and he doesn’t need me to explain such things to him like one does a toddler. He can read between the lines without there being any words in the book.”

“Do you think Valentino will have such reservations on the subject? Personally, I think him quite bold. Genuine. He won’t string Vox along like you have.”

Alastor drummed the fingers of his other hand against the chair arm, something jealous rearing its head in his chest. Vox may have been oblivious to the feelings hidden behind Valentino’s awestruck gazes and playful smirks, but Alastor wasn’t. The moth-demon was developing a school-girl crush and yesterday’s ‘dance routine’ certainly proved that.

“A silly, unrequited crush does not equate to love,” Alastor drawled. “But then again, you can’t tell the difference, can you? Your abilities to sense emotions don’t quite extend as far as you’d have me believe. After all, what’s the use in sensing emotions that you cannot feed upon?”

There was a long pause and Alastor smirked triumphantly and relaxed into the chair.

“Are you certain that it is unrequited?”

Alastor chuckled, shaking his head. “Ah ah ah, that won’t work. As I’ve just said, you cannot sense love, only lust, and the two are not the same.”

“Then you’re perfectly fine with Vox lusting after Valentino? He was certainly aroused during his ‘demonstration’ yesterday.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Alastor, ignoring the jealous creature starting to rise to its feet inside him. “But I’m hardly surprised that Vox felt arousal at someone who was *dressed* to arouse. As much as I dislike Valentino’s venomous tongue and his wandering hands, I admit that the man must be somewhat competent at his job considering the number of clients he entangles himself with. I hardly begrudge Vox *looking*.”

“As I recall, Vox lusted after you initially,” said The Voice. “And look how quickly that grew into something much deeper. How are you so certain that the same thing won’t happen with Valentino? I doubt Valentino would push him away as you did. It wouldn’t take twenty *years* for him to accept Vox’s advances. He might even make the first move.”

An irritated frown pinched Alastor’s eyebrows and he drummed his fingers against the chair arm in a steady rhythm. “If you’re trying to make me question Vox’s faithfulness, you’re going to be extremely disappointed.”

“There is nothing to be unfaithful to, little fawn. As Vox told Valentino, you’re not together.”

Alastor’s frown deepened. Had Vox really said that to Valentino? Technically it was true, but still...

“And unlike you, Valentino will be able to return Vox’s lust. That darling moth-demon will be able to give Vox everything he needs in a relationship. Everything you *can’t*.”

Alastor’s fingers curled into the fabric of the chair. That stung. Annoyingly, it wasn’t something he could protest easily - Valentino *could* offer Vox physical intimacy where Alastor couldn’t.

“I think we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves,” Alastor hummed, hiding how her words were beginning to crawl under his skin and poke at his brain. He was accustomed to her manipulations now, but every so often she would strike a nerve and it would rattle him. He could only hope she hadn’t noticed, that she didn’t keep tugging the thread until the stitches unravelled entirely. “Vox isn’t going to toss aside twenty years of friendship for a man that tried to drug and kill him. He hasn’t even noticed Valentino’s soft glances, let alone thought about him intimately.”

“Are you quite sure? Vox has purchased flowers for him. A beautiful, romantic bouquet.”

Alastor raised his eyebrows, caught off-guard. “You’re lying.”

Amusement coloured her tone. “Am I? Have you been to his station today? Have you spoken to either of them since you stormed off like a sulking toddler yesterday?”

Alastor straightened, heat creeping up his neck. “I was only trying to point out that Vox doesn’t have to *degrade* himself with such uncreative smut. He’s better than that.”

“Valentino must have felt *wonderful* hearing what you think of his art. You did know he was watching, after all. You can be quite *vicious* when you want to be...”

Alastor clenched his fists. “Why should I care what Valentino thinks? He is the epitome of perversion and filth and *everything* that is wrong with the brutish male mind.”

There was a dark chuckle and Alastor grimaced, realising his error too late.

“Ah, so you feel *threatened* by him. By what he’s capable of. You don’t see a victim like Vox does. When you look at Valentino, you see the men in the forest. You don’t see how *strong* Valentino is for using sex as a weapon to get what he wants. You don’t see how *brave* he is for facing his insecurities and turning them on the people who would use them against him. Valentino is everything you *failed* to be.”

Alastor bared his teeth in a snarl. “Valentino is a glorified *whore* who owns a director’s chair.”

“Valentino is a man who fell in love with someone who promised him the Earth and once he had him in his grasp, forced him to perform for his friends. Valentino is a man who was tricked into drug dealing and sex work because he was too blinded by love to realise that he was being used. Valentino is a man that protected the women he was in charge of, even when his own lover asked for their company through the night. Valentino is a man who was used as a scapegoat by someone he trusted and ended up in prison because of it. Valentino is a man who died meaninglessly in a prison riot, alone and with the terrible realisation that he meant nothing to anyone.”

Alastor fell silent, eyes wide with surprise.

“Even in death, he has been cursed with a body that people lust after, a tongue that people will do anything to taste. He still has to perform for his boss’ friends and he slides into dark alleys to give demons a high and get them off because he needs the money and occasionally, someone offers him their soul. He still means nothing to everyone, but he chases that Overlord status, that *power* because he’s ambitious enough to want to change his eternal fate. Like a moth chasing the bright light of the moon and never reaching it.”

Alastor remained quiet.

“There are two sides to every story, little fawn. Unlike you, Valentino didn’t cower from the shadows. He embraced the curse Hell put on him and used it to manipulate sinners, to gain power. He is accustomed to being used, but now he has met Vox, and I think we *both* know how charming that picturebox can be. Valentino will fall hard and fast, mark my words.”

Alastor ground his teeth together, ears lowering a fraction.

“And won’t they be perfect for one another? Valentino, who craves kindness and sincerity, who wants to feel as though he *matters* to someone, and Vox, who craves a gentle touch, who wants to know what *love* feels like. Imagine the passion between them. The sex would be *intense*.”

Alastor winced and dropped his gaze. She scoffed at him.

“You would deprive Vox of the touch he so desperately craves? You would be selfish enough to trap him into a relationship so unsatisfying for him? Valentino can give him so much more than you can. Valentino can heal him in ways your flashy magic would never achieve.”

Shame and anguish swirled in a potent mix in Alastor’s gut. He knew that this was her goal, that she was trying to tease these feelings out of him, that she was trying to feed on him... but was anything she said a lie? Alastor might not want to hear such things, but did that make them any less true?

Vox burned so brightly... Alastor’s shadows would only dim his light. Vox wanted things that Alastor couldn’t give him. Vox deserved things that Alastor might never be able to offer. And he had so many reservations about being with another man, whereas it obviously came easy to Valentino. Valentino had faced his problems head-on in such a short amount of time, yet Alastor was still grappling with his, still running from them.

...Perhaps he should step back from Vox? Allow whatever was happening between Vox and Valentino to blossom...

He startled when a cool hand landed on his knee and he looked down to find his silhouette scowling at him from the floor, its mouth turned down angrily. He hadn’t noticed its escape.

He tilted his head at it curiously and its gaze softened a fraction as it squeezed his knee. Then it slid behind him, rising up the wall behind the chair before it reached out to pet his ear the same way Vox enjoyed doing.

Alastor blinked and the shadow appeared at his feet again with a grin, and it *vibrated* in place, reminding Alastor of Vox’s excitement yesterday when they had been on their way to the restaurant.

Suddenly, it skittered its fingers over Alastor's arms and when Alastor stared at it, confused, it pulled a face and glanced around the bookshop before it slithered over to a small radio on the opposite side of the room. It flipped the device on and turned the dials quickly, creating a thick crackle of static and it looked at Alastor hopefully.

A genuine smile touched Alastor's lips and the silhouette grinned and tuned into a station playing big band music. It began dancing with itself across the walls and Alastor bit back a chuckle.

Eventually, it found its way back to Alastor and it took his hand and rubbed its thumb over his palm in the same way Vox had all those years ago when their friendship was still relatively new, when Alastor was still learning how to trust Vox's touch.

He gazed at his silhouette fondly and it met his eyes with a worried expression before it placed a hand on his chest, over his heart.

"Thank you," he murmured to it and it smiled, pleased, before becoming dormant once more.

There were a lot of things that Valentino could give Vox that Alastor couldn't, but there were also a lot of things that Alastor could give that *Valentino* couldn't.

Static was his and Vox's love language - one that no one else could understand. They could convey emotions through their static, comfort one another, tease each other... Valentino would never be able to give Vox that.

The ear petting was something that comforted them both; something Vox had started in their first year of friendship to deepen the trust between them, to soothe them both. As was the hand-holding and gentle massages.

Then there was the dancing - something they were both good at. Something they did often, sometimes as a challenge, sometimes for fun, and sometimes because they just wanted to be close to each other.

The Voice was wrong; Alastor might not be able to offer Vox sex, but that didn't mean he was depriving him of *touch*. Of intimacy.

Valentino perhaps wasn't the vile demon Alastor had thought him to be and he could stand to be a little less hostile towards him, but he wasn't going to let the moth-demon interfere with his and Vox's relationship. They had worked hard to get where they were and there was a level of trust between them that was unheard of in Hell. Valentino couldn't rival that. He didn't know Vox like Alastor did.

Vox was *his*.

He smiled pleasantly, noticing how silent The Voice had become. "You're wrong," he said simply. "I can give Vox everything he needs, everything he wants. And Vox *knows it*."

"You can't give him *everything*."

"I can give him what matters."

The Voice fell quiet once more and Alastor smirked and rose from his seat, stretching his back out. "I should thank you for helping me to overcome my tiresome hatred of Valentino. Things will be so much easier if we get along, so I'm grateful for you shedding some light on the matter." He grinned wickedly and summoned his cane, twirling it around his fingers nonchalantly. And then, to rub salt in the wound: "It's like having a personal therapist. How handy you are!"

The lights flickered with her anger and he chuckled and headed towards the door, striding over the sleeping goat-like sinner. "If you would be so kind as to unlock the door for me, then you can enjoy your meal." He flicked his sharp smirk to the ceiling. "Perhaps a tad *lighter* than you were anticipating?"

The lock clicked and Alastor curled his fingers around the handle.

“Do you really think he’ll stay with you when he realises how broken and weak you are?”

Alastor smiled in amusement. “Oh, do change the record, dearie. This one has been on the needle far too long.”

He opened the door and sauntered out of it.

Misery lapped at Vox’s heart even as he plastered on a smile for the newly-employed Valentino.

Valentino would keep his status as director and the moth-demon had been true to his word and coaxed a significant number of actors and editors and other staff away from Eros’ studio by lunchtime two days after their chat. It was quite impressive how quickly he had poached them, although Vox got the feeling that Eros wasn’t the greatest boss in the world, especially considering the new bruises that had appeared on Valentino’s arms since their last talk - the ones the moth-demon was trying (and failing) to hide.

Vox gave Valentino a tour of his modest television station and showed him around the two studios he owned, one of which would be Valentino’s to set up however he pleased. Valentino seemed excited by the prospect and the smile never left his face all day as he trotted after Vox like a loyal puppy.

Vox, on the other hand, felt wretched. He hated arguing with Alastor and he had barely slept for the past two nights, wondering if he should give Alastor space or appear in his living room with a bottle of brandy in hand, ready to drop to his knees and beg the Radio Demon for forgiveness.

They neared the end of the tour and Vox took Valentino to see the downstairs dressing rooms, which would eventually be marked private for Valentino and his actors only. In one of the dressing rooms was a beautiful bouquet of Sweet Williams, red tulips, huge dahlias, a dozen red roses, and a smattering of yellow roses, with a small card tied to their stems, which was addressed to Valentino.

Valentino glanced at the card in surprise before raising an eyebrow at Vox.

“A ‘welcome to the company’ gift,” said Vox with a tired smile and a pang of grief in his chest. The flowers had actually been a surprise gift for Alastor to receive after their meal. He had spent over an hour in the florist (which was a rare thing indeed to find in Hell), learning about the love language of flowers and trying to pick out the best mix to convey his feelings for the Radio Demon.

They much preferred to give gifts to one another in the form of alcohol and music, but Alastor could be quite the old-fashioned romantic sometimes and Vox had ventured home with the occasional rose or tulip or even just a simple daisy that Alastor had presented to him as a joke. He had never been an admirer of flowers until he met Alastor, now he gazed upon them with fondness and a feeling of warmth in his chest.

Unfortunately, cut flowers didn’t last long and the bouquet had been quite expensive, so it was a shame for it to go to waste. He could buy Alastor another bouquet once they were on speaking terms again, but he didn’t particularly like the idea of keeping the flowers in his own house and being reminded of their argument every time he caught sight of them. Valentino apparently liked flowers, so it only made sense that Vox gave them to him.

Valentino glanced over the bouquet with a soft gaze. “These are beautiful, Vox.” He raised his eyebrows a fraction. “Twelve red roses?”

Whoops. Perhaps he should have expected Valentino to know a thing or two about floriography. Vox should probably feign ignorance otherwise Valentino might suspect that they weren’t originally meant for him.

“Thought they looked nice with the tulips,” Vox said lightly and Valentino lifted the bouquet to his nose for a moment before smiling gently at Vox.

“It’s certainly a very, ah... *captivating* display. Did you know flowers have their own language?”

“...Do they?”

Valentino chuckled and gazed at the bouquet once more. “I think the florist might have misinterpreted what you were asking for.”

“It isn’t offensive, is it?” Vox joked and he hoped his expression wasn’t too strained.

After work he was going straight over to Alastor’s house and apologising.

Valentino sent him a doe-eyed look, fuzzy antennae flopped forwards, and smile a little gooey and *oh shit, did Valentino have a crush on him?*

Vox blinked, quickly running through the few interactions he’d had with Valentino.

Ah, crap.

Had Alastor noticed? He hoped not, especially with the Radio Demon already upset with him. This would only make things more complicated.

He could smack himself. Valentino had a crush on him and Vox had given him a very obviously romantic, very obviously *expensive* bouquet of flowers. He would have to pay more attention to his actions.

Still, what harm could a tiny crush do? Valentino barely knew him. He would move on in no time.

“Quite the opposite, amorcito. Although I do wonder how you described my relationship to you to achieve a bouquet as charming as this,” Valentino purred and Vox’s smile grew a little more strained.

“Maybe I just went to a shit florist.”

Valentino’s smirk dimmed a fraction and Vox turned on his heel and led Valentino upstairs to his office so they could finish the paperwork.

He found Alastor perched on his desk with a lopsided smile.

His heart *soared*.

“Al,” he said, unable to contain the excitement in his tone and Alastor’s smile widened.

“It appears I’ve missed your incessant chatter about floppy disks and digital watches,” Alastor drawled.

Vox barked out a laugh and Valentino chose that moment to catch up to Vox, clutching tightly at his large bouquet of flowers.

Alastor’s smile faltered and Vox winced.

“Oh,” Valentino said, frowning at Alastor. “You’re here.”

“It’s a common occurrence,” agreed Alastor, tearing his gaze away from the bouquet to shoot Vox a hurt look.

Oh, he had *definitely* noticed Valentino’s crush. Damn it.

He slid off Vox’s desk, ears starting to lower and smile becoming a little sharper. “I see you’re both busy. I can come back later.”

No. No, no, no. Vox wasn't prepared to deal with another few days of radio silence. Two was *plenty*.

He tilted his screen to Alastor, making sure Valentino couldn't see, and his face disappeared to make way for some very large white text as he addressed the Radio Demon.

"It's up to you," Vox said, without a mouth. "But don't feel obligated to leave."

Alastor glanced at him sourly but paused as he read the text on Vox's screen.

They were for you, after dinner.

Alastor raised a delicate eyebrow and the text disappeared to be replaced by Vox's sheepish, pink-tinted face.

A smirk tugged at Alastor's lips, ears pulling into a more natural position. "Oh, I just wouldn't like to distract you from all of this very important paperwork." He gestured to the stack of paper on one side of Vox's desk. "What I have to say can wait until tonight."

Vox's shoulders slumped a fraction and Alastor noticed.

"I merely wanted to tell you that I've rebooked our meal for Thursday evening. I thought we might have a second go at it." He glanced briefly at the bouquet and back to Vox again. "And I daresay I might have to plan something special for after dessert."

Static bounced off Alastor's skin as Vox attempted to control his enthusiasm. "A proper gentleman would wait for the second date to steal a kiss," Vox teased, unable to help himself even with Valentino standing right behind him.

“Presumptuous,” chided Alastor. “This is merely a dinner between two like-minded businessmen...”

“Ah, I see. I’ll bring my reports.”

“See to it that you do,” Alastor drawled as he sauntered past Vox and peered curiously at the bouquet of flowers in the scowling Valentino’s grasp.

“A dozen red roses? And tulips and dahlias, oh my. How delightful.” He fixed Valentino with a honeyed grin. “Someone must truly *adore* you.”

“Vox gave them to me as a welcome present,” Valentino said, clutching the bouquet tighter as he narrowed his eyes at Alastor. “He wasn’t aware that flowers have meanings.”

Alastor feigned surprise and glanced at Vox. “Is that so?”

Vox nodded with a helpless shrug. “I just thought they were pretty. And Valentino said he liked flowers the other day, so...”

“Well then,” said Alastor, propping himself against his cane. “Perhaps next time you should choose something a little less... romantic for your employees.”

Vox’s eyes widened. “Romantic?” he squeaked before throwing Valentino an apologetic look. “Ah crap. No wonder you looked so confused. Sorry, Val. I wouldn’t have picked them if I’d known.”

Valentino’s shoulders drooped with disappointment. “...Está bien. I don’t mind.”

Vox caught Alastor’s gaze, sending an appreciative burst of static up his arm, accompanied by a subtly grateful look and Alastor’s eyes brightened in amusement before he tipped his head in acknowledgement.

“Wouldn’t want any of your employees thinking you have misplaced feelings for them,” Alastor commented, chuckling, and neither of them missed the way Valentino pursed his lips.

“I’ve taken quite enough of your time,” Alastor said, straightening. He turned to Valentino and Vox was surprised to see him wearing a sincere smile. “I think you’ll find Vox far superior to your previous employer. You’ll do well under his guidance.”

Valentino stared at Alastor in surprise and the Radio Demon offered him a warm smile before shooting Vox a wink and strolling away.

Vox felt suddenly breathless as his heart thundered in his chest.

They were going to be fine. The other night had been a small blip in their vast friendship and Alastor was willing to forgive him for the misstep.

He smiled to himself. He hadn’t realised how forgiving love could be. Would he always feel so desolate after an argument? Would he always feel this overwhelmed with relief whenever they made up? Would he always feel so light-spirited whenever he saw Alastor, even if only for the briefest of moments? He had all of eternity to find out.

His heart felt as though it would burst through his rib cage. He couldn’t wait for Thursday. Three days and Alastor would be officially *his*.

He watched Alastor vanish into the shadows and he finally led Valentino into the office with a much brighter grin than he had greeted the moth-demon with earlier.

Perhaps he could slip a few buttercups and daisies through Alastor’s letterbox tonight. It would surely earn him a chuckle.

That evening, Valentino stared forlornly at the gorgeous bouquet of flowers he had placed in a vase as a centrepiece on his dining table. He propped his head on one hand and sighed.

He had been a fool to hope that Vox had gifted him the arrangement with any sort of romantic intention behind it. *Of course*, the Television Demon wouldn't know the meaning behind the flowers.

Still, it was sweet that Vox had remembered that he liked flowers. The gift felt... personal.

He smiled to himself, lost in gentle thoughts of the Television Demon before he frowned.

Vox would never give him a second glance when he had his precious Radio Demon to fawn over. It was obvious the two were infatuated with one another, although Valentino couldn't begin to comprehend what Vox saw in that wretched, temperamental, acid-tongued Overlord. The man was a damn serial killer! How could someone as sweet as Vox have fallen for an asshole like that? The Radio Demon's vicious reputation was enough to send anyone running for the hills, so why was Vox so enamoured by him?

Was Alastor tricking him somehow? Putting on a show so he could manipulate Vox?

Valentino scowled at the flowers. It didn't seem like it. They argued like an old married couple but they always crawled their way back to one another. They couldn't seem to stay apart for very long.

It wasn't fair. How did someone like Alastor snag someone like Vox? It was just Valentino's luck that the one person in this putrid cesspool that had shown him any kindness was besotted with a raging psychopath.

Love wasn't supposed to exist in Hell, but Vox was... Vox was something else. There had been chemistry between them from the start, raw and powerful. The man was easy on the eyes too. He was a triple threat - handsome, good-natured, charismatic... How had he ended up in Hell?

It was a shame he was so fixated on someone who would dim his light, someone who would taint all his best qualities and inevitably break his heart. People like the Radio Demon grew bored easily. Vox would be tossed aside after a while, left broken and bleeding, asking what he had done wrong.

Valentino was no stranger to that type of 'love'.

He wished he could spare Vox that hurt. He wished he could show the sweet Television Demon what it really meant to be loved. He would show Vox a good time. He would give Vox anything he wanted. He would keep Vox happy and Valentino would finally know what it meant to mean something to someone.

There was a spark between them. Valentino felt it every time he was near Vox. He knew Vox felt it too. He had to.

He plucked a red rose from the vase and twirled it around his fingers, being careful not to catch the thorns.

Perhaps when Alastor eventually broke Vox's heart, Valentino could pick up the pieces and sew it back together. He could wait. He had waited years for affection from a horrible man who never really loved him, so he could certainly wait for a kind man who might one day want him.

He tilted the rose to his nose and was startled by a knock at the door.

He frowned. He wasn't expecting company.

He wandered to the door and ensured the chains were hooked as he opened it a fraction, one hand on the pistol at his hip. A ragged goat-like demon stared up at him.

“Mr. Valentino?”

“...Yes?”

An envelope was thrust at him. “From Mr. Vox.”

Valentino took the envelope and the goat-demon scuttled away, looking nervously around him.

Valentino locked the door and carefully opened the envelope. Inside was a typed letter with Vox’s name printed at the bottom.

Meet me tonight at The Cryptid Bookshop. 11 P.M.

Yours sincerely,

Vox

Valentino reread the simple letter and a grin spread across his face. He knew there had been a spark between them!

He grabbed a coat and hurried into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Brace yourselves... here comes the drop ;)

Chapter 17: Like A Moth To A Flame

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The bookshop appeared empty and shrouded in darkness when Valentino finally found it. However, the door was unlocked and when Valentino stepped inside, the lights flickered on. The wonders of modern technology!

“Vox?” he called curiously and when there was no answer, he wandered between the bookcases, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Television Demon.

It soon became clear that Vox had not yet arrived. Valentino explored the small bookshop, glancing over the shelves boredly. He pulled a face at the thick novels and heavy, leather-bound literature. Where were the magazines? The gossip rags? The X-rated titles?

“Hello, Valentino.”

Valentino startled, tearing his pistol from his hip and glancing around wildly. Where had that feminine voice come from? It was like a breath of wind - a whisper of leaves between trees. It wasn't a *normal* voice.

“Who's there?” he snarled. “Show yourself!”

“I'm afraid there isn't much to show.”

Valentino whirled around again, pulse racing. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“I have many names.”

He shivered at the eerie tone. “*What* are you?”

A soft chuckle. “A nightmare in the shadows of a world you can’t see.”

“Oh good, we’re speaking in riddles now. Just when I thought my day couldn’t get any *better*.”

Valentino slowly made his way to the door but before he could reach it, he heard a lock click.

“Ah ah ah,” said The Voice. “I’m not finished with you just yet.”

“I’m waiting for a friend,” Valentino said. “He’ll be here any moment now. He’s powerful.”

A condescending chuckle. “Alastor was right. You really are quite stupid, aren’t you?”

Valentino frowned before his heart sank as the realisation set in. “You wrote the letter...”

“Well, we got there eventually, I suppose.”

“How do you know Alastor?” Valentino asked warily. “How do you know where I *live*?”

“I know a great many things, little lovebug. I see everything. I hear everything. I feel everything. I watch your insignificant lives play out on Earth and then I watch you in death, too.”

Valentino tried the door handle anyway and he pursed his lips when he found it locked. “What do you want from me? Why did you invite me here?”

“I have a task for you.”

Valentino scoffed. “Not interested.”

“You don’t know what it is yet.”

“Creepy, disembodied voice that won’t tell me its name says it has a task for me. No thanks. I’ll pass.” Valentino returned to the bookcases and found the largest, heaviest book on the shelves. He lobbed it at a window only for it to drop uselessly onto the floor.

Either those windows were triple glazed or his captor had magically reinforced them.

“Pity. And here I thought you wanted a chance with Vox...”

Valentino’s brows pinched together and he stilled. “What do you mean?”

“I can *taste* your jealousy. You want what Alastor has. The darling picturebox has stolen your heart, has he not?”

Valentino hesitated, glancing up at the ceiling before squinting between the bookcases, searching for the owner of the voice. “...Where are you?”

“The void between Heaven and Hell, where time and space mean nothing. Answer my question.”

Valentino pursed his lips. “Perhaps I’m *curious*. ”

There was a light chuckle. “I think your interest in him runs far deeper than idle curiosity. There’s a certain... chemistry between you two. Chemistry that far exceeds what lies between

Vox and Alastor.”

A frown pinched Valentino’s eyebrows. “Do you really think so?”

“Absolutely,” purred The Voice. “It is a shame that Alastor dug his claws into Vox before you could get the chance to really know him.”

Valentino eyed the locked door. “What do you want with me?” he asked quietly, unease settling in his gut.

“To help you get what you deserve.”

Valentino scowled. “ *Los cojones*. You clearly want something. I’m not sure what you think *I* can give you.”

“I think we can help each other, sweet lovebug.”

Valentino wrinkled his features at the nickname and The Voice hummed in amusement.

“Alastor hides many secrets. He keeps them close to his chest, ensuring not even Vox knows about his troubles and the mistakes he has made. For you see, he knows that if he were to reveal these parts of himself, Vox would leave him in revulsion. Their friendship would be lost.”

Valentino paused, curiosity piqued. What secrets could Alastor possibly have that would break such a seemingly strong bond?

“He puts on a mask around Vox to bury the shame and guilt eating at his heart,” continued The Voice. “For he knows that what he has done is truly terrible.”

Now Valentino was very interested. “And what exactly is it that he’s done?”

“If I tell you, will you help me?”

Valentino wasn’t that foolish. “That entirely depends on what it is you want me to do.”

“I want you to rid Alastor of distractions, such as Vox. I want to show him the consequences of his... disobedience.”

Valentino straightened. “What do you mean? Disobedience? You make it sound as though...” He trailed off and The Voice made another sound of mirth.

“As though I *own* him? As though he sold his soul to me?”

Valentino stared at the ceiling, stunned.

There was soft laughter and it felt cold and cruel in a way that made Valentino shiver.

“He hides many secrets indeed,” she purred. “His lust for power knows no bounds. Sometimes, he forgets who granted him that power. He forgets how to speak to his master.”

Valentino glanced at the door handle again. “You want me to separate them as... punishment?” He frowned. “Will that not also punish Vox? He’s done nothing wrong.”

“You’ll be saving Vox from a life of misery tied to a power-hungry man who will use him however he sees fit. Vox will suffer if he pursues Alastor. Alastor cannot love him the way Vox wants him to. He isn’t capable of it. Yet, Alastor will string him along and pretend that he can in order to keep poor Vox wrapped around his little finger. Vox will be a mere tool to him.”

Like Valentino was to his own lover in life. He scowled. He wouldn't allow Vox to be subjected to the horrors and heartache that he was. He wouldn't allow Vox to have his light dimmed by a *monster*.

"How exactly do you want me to separate them? Vox won't listen to me if I tell him that Alastor will mistreat him. He won't believe it."

"You won't speak to Vox. Alastor is the one being punished. He needs to understand that there are repercussions for his actions. He needs to be reminded that his *cockiness* has no place here. He should humble himself to his creator, to the one that made him who he is. He is my servant, and that is all he is worthy of."

"And what am I supposed to say to him?" Valentino asked, frowning. "I'm hardly a match for him in power. He barely tolerates me as it is."

"You're going to tell him that you know he was raped."

Valentino fell silent, eyes wide and jaw slack.

"You're going to tell him that you know what he let those three men do to him in that forest. You're going to tell him that you know it brought him pleasure and how vile that makes him. You're going to tell him that he's filthy and soiled and Vox would think so too, if he knew. And if he refuses to stop seeing Vox, if he refuses to return to me with a better attitude, you will say that you'll expose his secrets not only to Vox, but all of Hell. You'll remind him how pretty he looks as prey. How fast he'll have to run to escape the monsters in Hell, including the same three monsters that devoured him that first time - the ones who seek revenge after he murdered them."

The silence stretched on before finally, Valentino shook his head, horrified.

"No."

“...No?”

“No,” growled Valentino. “He’s an asshole, but he doesn’t deserve that! You want me to *break* him over what? What did he do to earn that sort of cruelty?”

“I told you, he is disobedient.”

“Why? Didn’t sit and shake his paw when you asked him to?” Valentino snarled before tugging on the handle violently and making a frustrated sound when it didn’t budge. “Let me go. I won’t help you.”

The lights flickered. “I think you misunderstand the situation.”

“I understand perfectly,” Valentino snapped, baring his teeth at the ceiling. “Not only will the Radio Demon immediately kill me if I dared confront him, but I’m not so *evil* that I’d threaten to reveal his secrets purely to... to *lure* Vox to my side! I want him to want me for *me*, not because he has no other options!”

“That is never going to happen when he’s being manipulated by Alastor. He will never want you,” said The Voice, tone a little darker.

“Then I’ll have to live with it!” Valentino hissed, throwing all four arms out in a mixture of anger and exasperation. He pointed an accusatory finger at the ceiling. “And you’re wrong about Vox. He wouldn’t be disgusted if he knew what Alastor had been *forced* to endure. He would be protective and furious. You know *nothing* about him if you think otherwise.”

The lights flickered again. “Valentino-”

“No,” he interrupted, fists clenched. “No, I’m not interested. I won’t be your puppet.” He turned and kicked at the door but fury bubbled over inside him and he whirled around again so he could wag a finger at the ceiling.

“And just so you know, I’m glad Alastor killed those men, his *attackers*. I hope he made them suffer like they made him suffer. You don’t *let* someone rape you and you certainly don’t enjoy it, no matter how your body reacts. And if I ever find out who those *monsters* are, I’ll make sure to put a bullet through their heads, for fun.”

He turned and kicked at the door again.

The lights went out.

“As delicious as your anger is, little lovebug, it isn’t quite as filling as some of your *other* emotions,” said The Voice slowly and unease blossomed in Valentino’s gut even as he continued to scowl. “You see, I much prefer *fear*.”

“Then you’ll have to starve,” growled Valentino.

Cold laughter. Valentino forced himself to stand strong, to not retreat and press his back against the door.

“Another of Alastor’s secrets is what he does for me. He brings me my meals. Mostly regular sinners these days, but occasionally I ask him for an Overlord. They are sweetest, after all. More filling. They also have... other uses, although I haven’t told Alastor about those. You see, there is a reason that the Overlords Alastor fights never regenerate - and it has nothing to do with *his* power.”

Valentino tried not to look too intrigued. “I don’t care about your deal with Alastor.”

“Oh, but you should! It concerns you, after all. You are an Overlord - one that Alastor would hardly protest bringing to me if I asked him. It’s laughable really, how valiantly you defend him and yet he would eagerly throw *you* into the wolves’ den.”

Valentino's antennae drooped and a thread of fear made itself known in his chest.

"I'll let you in on one of *my* secrets," purred The Voice. "This void I'm in, this *nothingness* is somewhat of a prison. You might know it as Purgatory. I need someone to unlock the door - someone with enough power to do so. So far, everyone has failed me. There have been a few who got close - angels, demons, and humans alike - but in the end, none have proved strong enough. Every soul has *burned* out of existence." Her voice lowered into something dangerous. "Perhaps you would like to volunteer your soul?"

Valentino stepped back and his spine pushed against the door. Laughter echoed about the darkened bookshop.

"How delicious your fear is, sweet lovebug. Still, I worry you don't fully understand. Let me make things clear."

A radio flicked on somewhere, playing nothing but interference and the sound grew louder and louder, impossibly so, and the towering bookcases toppled over, one after another with heavy crashes. Books flew from the shelves, hurled by an invisible force, and Valentino ducked down to avoid being hit, but he grunted when a few thick, leather-bound textbooks slammed into his shoulders and stomach.

The lights flickered blindingly fast, forcing Valentino to squeeze his eyes shut, and galeforce winds swept around the bookshop, making him curl in on himself. The air grew unbearably warm and there was a distinctive smell of burning, and when Valentino managed to lift his gaze, he gasped at the sight of a raging inferno devouring the bookshop at a rapid pace. He sprung to his feet, nearly tumbling over from the force of the wind, and he grabbed the handle only to find the metal *scorching* hot.

He yelped and glanced at the ugly burn on his palm. The fire crept closer and Valentino's fear grew.

"Now where have I seen this before?" The Voice asked, somehow quiet yet perfectly clear in Valentino's ears above the racket of wind and fire and radio interference. "Oh, that's right. This is how you died, isn't it? Trapped in a tiny storage room in the middle of a prison riot. The handle too hot to touch and the smoke pouring in from under the door. You were

sweating. Surrounded by buckets and garbage bags, screaming for help, knowing no one could hear you. Knowing that no one would come to save you.”

Valentino coughed against the thick smoke filling his lungs. He looked around frantically, searching for an escape route as he began to sweat. There had to be a way out.

“You were alone. You weren’t worth saving. You meant nothing to the man you adored and you meant nothing to anyone in that prison. You’ve always been worthless. No one mourned you. No one even noticed you were dead for two days. Abandoned at birth and abandoned at death - no one has ever cared about you.”

The flames crackled and spat and a stray ember landed on one of Valentino’s antennae. He yelped as the fine hairs set alight, burning at a rapid pace. He patted at it desperately, wincing as his skin bubbled. The antenna smoked as the small fire was extinguished, leaving a torched, twig-like structure behind.

The nubs at Valentino’s back flapped uselessly and once again, Valentino mourned the loss of his wings. He might have been able to fight the fire if he still had them.

A cruelty Alastor had inflicted upon him.

“No one has ever cared about you... until Vox. Vox, who protected you *twice*. Vox, who can’t bear to see you suffer at Eros’ hands and has offered you a job even though he is clearly uncomfortable by the nature of your art. Vox, who defended you against a demon as powerful as Alastor. Vox, who bought you flowers, merely because you said you liked them.”

Valentino watched the flames edge closer. He shuffled to his right but the flames crackled and spat again, forcing him back towards the door.

“There’s potential there. All you need to do is get Alastor out of the picture.”

He coughed and spluttered, dropping low to the ground in an attempt to escape the smoke. His already limited vision grew fuzzy around the edges and nausea welled inside him.

“Vox cares about you. He can protect you. He can *save* you from the fire. Say yes to him, Valentino.”

Valentino trembled as his own skin became uncomfortable. Everything *burned*. “Yes,” he whimpered, drawing his arms over his head.

“You’ll confront Alastor? You’ll tell him what you know?”

Valentino hesitated.

The flames surged closer, lapping at his arms and making him howl in agony as his coat set alight. “Yes!” he cried out.

“You swear? If you lie to me, I will call upon Alastor to bring you to me.”

“I swear!” Valentino whined as his skin began to bleed.

“And when Vox tries to help Alastor, will you distract him? Will you remind him how foul and cruel the Radio Demon is?”

Valentino nodded helplessly as his head grew light from the smoke. He crumpled onto the floor, face down.

“Good boy.”

Suddenly, the fire was extinguished and the air cleared of smoke and Valentino's skin no longer caused him agony. He looked up to find the bookshop returned to the way it had been before - the bookcases standing upright and not a novel out of place. The lights were glowing warm and orange and the radio had switched off. The wind had stopped and the air smelled fresh and clean again.

Valentino glanced down at his own body and found it healed, his clothes bearing not a single speck of ash. He touched his antenna and found it still damaged and twig-like.

The Voice chuckled. "A reminder of what awaits you if you break your promise."

Valentino swallowed and raised to his feet slowly. "Alastor will kill me if I threaten him," he said quietly, voice shaking from his lingering panic.

"He won't. If he tries, remind him that when you regenerate, you'll tell everyone what you know. He loses either way."

Valentino fell silent. Temporary death by Alastor's hand was preferable to whatever the creature in this bookshop had planned for him if he disobeyed.

"Alright," he whispered, shame colouring his tone. "Sí. I'll do it."

"You and Vox will look so *lovely* together," she said and for the first time, Valentino recognised the ridicule in her voice. "You'll have what you've always wanted."

He lowered his gaze. *Would he?* Were his dreams worth destroying Alastor? Were they worth tearing Vox's happiness away? It seemed a hefty price to pay...

"Vox will come to you when Alastor breaks his heart. Be there for him, little lovebug," she said and Valentino grimaced but nodded.

“I knew I could count on you,” she said, amused and mocking.

The lock clicked.

“Go. Find Alastor before Thursday. If you wait, it will be harder to break them apart.”

Valentino slipped out of the bookshop, head hung low.

Chapter End Notes

~It's going down, we're yelling timber~ ;)

Chapter 18: All's Fair In Love And War

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Thursday arrived and Alastor grinned as his silhouette waltzed with itself around the room. He straightened his tie and dusted off his waistcoat and shook his head in amusement when his silhouette peered over the top of the mirror and offered him a knowing smirk.

“Hush, you,” Alastor huffed.

His chest was warm and tight with excitement for the evening ahead. He thought he had loved Harriet, but he had never felt this way before. He had never felt so breathless just thinking about Harriet. His heart had never beat so fast merely preparing to go for dinner with Harriet.

He realised now that what he had with Harriet didn't come *close* to the love he held for Vox.

He smiled at his own reflection. If someone had told him in life that he would fall head over heels for another man in death, first he would have politely told them to seek a doctor and then he would have wrinkled his nose at the thought of not only leaving Harriet, but the idea of feeling *anything* for someone of the same sex.

Particularly after that night.

And yet... Vox was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

His gaze softened. After this evening, Vox would be his.

He would spend the rest of eternity showing Vox what it meant to be loved, touching him tenderly, showering him in the attention he had never received in life. He would give Vox *everything* he deserved and more.

There was a knock at the door and he tilted his head curiously, glancing at the clock. Vox was early.

He brightened, pulse racing at the thought of seeing the man he loved so dearly. His silhouette grinned like a Cheshire Cat and ruffled his hair before becoming dormant at his feet, and Alastor made a sound of irritation as he smoothed out his hair before giving up with it and deciding that Vox would probably like the fluffy look.

His tail attempted to wiggle where it was trapped beneath his trousers and belt and he laughed at his own infatuation with the Television Demon.

With one last glance in the mirror, he trotted downstairs and threw the door open with a smirk.

He blinked at the sight of a wide-eyed Valentino.

“Can I help you?” Alastor asked, one eyebrow arched, trying not to let his irritation show.

Valentino stared at him, mouth opening then closing again. He licked his lips and swallowed and Alastor noticed that one of his antennae had been damaged.

“Oh, Valentino. You really ought to stop fighting so much. You’re a representative of Vox now. I would hate for you to tarnish his image,” he drawled.

Valentino continued to stare at him and Alastor caught how his fingers were curled tightly into his coat. He frowned.

“Did a client do this?” he asked, attempting to soften his voice a fraction. He could see that Valentino was tense and after everything The Voice had told him, it wouldn’t hurt for him to be a little more patient with the moth-demon, a little more sympathetic even if he didn’t yet trust him.

Valentino ground his jaw, looking torn. His gaze darted off to the side briefly before focusing on Alastor once more and Alastor recognised the distress in his gaze.

Alastor blinked in surprise then made a decision he hoped he wouldn’t later regret. He stepped aside and gestured into his hall. “Would you like to come inside?”

Valentino’s eyes widened but he didn’t move and Alastor’s frown deepened, a hint of concern making itself known in his chest.

“Valentino... I promise you that Vox will treat and pay you fairly. You don’t need to seek out additional income from your clients if you don’t enjoy such interactions, if *this* is going to be the result.” He gestured to the damaged antenna.

Valentino looked even more conflicted and his antennae lowered as he continued to stare silently at Alastor.

Alastor’s concern grew without his permission. “Are you alright?” he asked, almost gently.

Valentino appeared to flinch at the question. He took a step back, away from the house, then grimaced and stilled, gaze dropping to the floor for a moment.

Glancing up and down the street at the curious passers-by, Alastor pressed his lips together. “Please come in, Valentino. Allow me to make you a cup of tea and we can discuss whatever it is that troubles you so.” Vox would understand the interruption to their dining plans - perhaps he would even be pleased that Alastor was extending an olive branch to Valentino.

Again, Valentino flinched, but he shuffled inside, unable to meet Alastor's gaze. Once the door was closed, Alastor gestured for him to follow him into the living room.

Valentino's feet stayed firmly planted in the hallway. He muttered something beneath his breath.

"Come again?" Alastor asked, tilting his head.

Valentino met his gaze and there was terror and distress there, and... what was that? Anger? Guilt? Disgust? It was difficult to make out.

"I know," Valentino said, voice quiet and almost uncertain.

"You know what?" Alastor asked, raising an eyebrow.

Again, Valentino hesitated. "I... know about your deal. With the thing in the bookshop."

Alastor's smile wavered, his other eyebrow joining the first.

"I know about your chain and the demons you're forced to take to her," his voice had somehow grown even quieter and dread rose in Alastor's stomach, making his heart sink and causing static to prick the air.

"Valentino, what is this?" he asked, trying to remain calm, hoping that the moth-demon was the man Vox believed him to be and not the man Alastor had believed him to be.

There was a pause and Valentino swallowed. Was that fear? Was he afraid of Alastor's wrath?

“She told me other things about you,” Valentino whispered and Alastor’s breath left him, ice spreading through his veins.

Please, no.

Valentino licked his lips. “I know you were raped.”

Bile crawled up Alastor’s throat and he stiffened as panic set his heart off racing. How could she? *Why* had she told him?

“If you... I’ll tell him. If you keep seeing him. If you’re disobedient. I’ll tell him. I’ll tell all of Hell.”

Valentino fumbled his words, his *threat*, and Alastor recognised the fear in his tone now - the fear that Alastor would *destroy him*. He watched Valentino fist his coat, his antennae low and *submissive* and Alastor felt his own smile sharpening as his static grew louder, his eyes flickering between normal pupils and radio dials.

“What did you say?” he asked lowly, dangerously, and Valentino flinched, averting his gaze. *Good*. He should be afraid.

“If you continue to pursue Vox, I’ll tell him. He’ll be disgusted. He’ll think you vile for what you... what you *let*...” He scowled. “What you went through.”

Alastor bared his teeth, fury rising within him. “How *dare* you,” he snarled. “How dare you come into my home and *threaten* me. How dare you speak of matters you know nothing of. How dare you speak such filthy lies of Vox. You know *nothing* of him if that is how you truly think he’ll react.”

Valentino wouldn’t meet his gaze and Alastor glared at him in disdain. “Tell him. I don’t care. Vox won’t regard me with disgust.” He grinned viciously. “But I imagine he’ll think far less of *you*.”

There was a stretch of silence before Valentino finally met his gaze. He looked almost resigned, which was an odd expression under these circumstances - considering *he* was the one threatening Alastor. "I'll tell all of Hell if you don't stop seeing him."

With a snarl, Alastor grabbed Valentino by the throat and slammed him against the wall. "You have some nerve," he spat as Valentino squirmed in his grip.

"If you kill me, I'll tell them all when I regenerate," Valentino managed. "They'll see you as prey. You'll spend the rest of eternity *running*."

Alastor's rage and panic exploded within him, causing him to throw Valentino across the hall as his body stretched and cracked into something monstrous.

"Wretched filth!" Alastor hissed as he advanced on Valentino, radio filters interfering with his words. "I knew you couldn't be trusted!"

Valentino picked himself up off the floor and threw Alastor a distressed look. "...You really should learn to *respect* your master."

Alastor's fury boiled over and he curled his shadows around the moth-demon's arms and legs, restraining him as he wrapped sharp claws around Valentino's throat, smirking as rivulets of blood trickled down purple skin.

"I knew you were desperate for his attention, but I never thought you'd stoop so low," he sneered at the writhing moth. "Working with her will be your downfall. She *lies*. She'll use you until she has no need for you and then, she'll extinguish your soul. She'll make you *burn*."

Valentino threw him a wild-eyed look and he grinned at the moth's fear.

“Vox pities you, but he will never truly care for you in the way you want him to,” Alastor drawled. “How could he? You mean nothing to anyone. It’s a bit of a running pattern, isn’t it? Your unrequited love, I mean. At least you’ll be a good *scapegoat* if Vox ever gets into a tricky situation...”

Valentino’s eyes widened as he stilled and Alastor’s smirk hitched higher. “What? You’re not the only one who knows a few *secrets*.”

Valentino scowled, struggling against Alastor’s shadows before he made a sound of frustration. “I don’t... I never wanted...” He clamped his mouth shut, looking angrily at the floor before he glowered at Alastor.

“Oh dear, what’s wrong?” Alastor asked mockingly. “You can give abuse but can’t take it? How *pathetic*.” His shadows pulled and Valentino cried out as his limbs were overstretched and Alastor leaned closer to his face, one claw caressing Valentino’s jugular.

“Perhaps you’d like to reconsider your threat?” Alastor whispered.

“Kill me and I promise you all of Hell will find out,” Valentino growled and Alastor snarled, fear flashing through his chest. He couldn’t go back to running, couldn’t go back to how things had been in those first few months after he had arrived in Hell.

He dragged his claws through Valentino’s face and the moth-demon hissed in pain.

“What exactly is your plan here?” Alastor snarled. “Vox will suspect there is something wrong if I stop seeing him. Do you really think he’ll suddenly take an interest in you? Are you so desperate, so *stupid* that you believe he’ll so easily *replace* me with you? You were alone in life and you’ll be alone in death. No one will *ever* want you, you perverted creature.”

The anger behind Valentino’s gaze grew. “Vox cares about me.”

“He feels *sorry* for you. Like one feels sorry for a helpless creature with a fractured limb. You’re weak. *Broken*. ”

Valentino grit his teeth. “*I’m* broken? You’re the one who can’t stand touch! The desperate one. The one who gets *pissy* every time Vox shows a scrap of attention to anyone that isn’t you. You’re the one who lives in constant fear of people thinking you’re *pretty*. You can’t cope with anything relating to sex! This is Hell, asshole! People don’t earn a place down here for being nice. Instead of being a *coward*, just accept that awful shit is going to happen to you down here and *move on*. ”

Alastor bristled. “And yet you’re the one trying to force himself upon Vox. You were turned into a *whore* by your own lover, you were abandoned by him, and now you strut around Hell, putting every inch of your body on display because you know that’s all anyone will ever want you for. Because you know that is all you’re good for. You are a mere tool for other demons’ enjoyment and that’s all you’ll ever be.”

Valentino’s eyes widened, his antennae falling low towards his back and Alastor realised his own ears were pinned to his head. They glared at each other for a long moment and for a mere *second*, Alastor saw his own hurt mirrored in Valentino’s gaze and he mused over how similar they were.

His grip on Valentino’s throat eased ever-so-slightly.

Suddenly, Valentino surged forwards, limbs still restrained by shadows, and kissed Alastor roughly, forcing his tongue into his mouth.

The shock had Alastor losing control of his shadows and they quickly dissolved, and Alastor’s breath hitched as he was shoved up against the nearest wall. A hand slipped between his legs and he froze, eyes wide and panic filling his chest as his memories were thrown back to that terrible night, back to pain and humiliation and cruelty.

Valentino pinned him against the wall, hand unmoving against the front of his trousers.

“You’ll never be able to give Vox what he wants,” Valentino whispered against his lips and the tone was bitter but the words cracked a little as he said them.

The moth-demon screamed as Alastor’s silhouette lunged for him, vicious and merciless as it clawed and bit and dragged Valentino around like a ragdoll.

Alastor trembled against the wall, grappling with his own memories, trying to fight his way back to the present. When he finally managed to focus on the scene in front of him, he watched a bloodied Valentino kick and swipe at thin air as the silhouette tore at his flesh like a feral animal.

“You foul piece of shit,” snarled Alastor, wondering when he had returned to his regular form. He could taste Valentino’s venom on his tongue, could feel his body trying to react, arousal pooling low in his belly and competing against a potent concoction of anxiety, shame, and fury.

He prowled towards the bleeding moth and his silhouette glanced up at him and stepped away from Valentino with a wicked grin. Alastor didn’t give the moth-demon time to scramble to his feet before his shadows curled around his gangly frame and hurled him into a wall, then another, and another, until Valentino was painted in bruises and groaning in agony. Alastor pounced upon him, ramming him into the floor as he wrapped his hands around the moth’s neck with a growl.

Valentino suddenly revealed a pistol and he set the muzzle against Alastor’s stomach, but his hand shook and he hesitated long enough for Alastor’s shadows to whip the weapon out of his grip and curl around his wrists and ankles and pull in opposite directions until he cried out at the strain.

Valentino looked up at him, agony in his gaze. “I’ll tell them,” he choked out. “Kill me and you’ll *never* be safe. The men you murdered... they’ll want revenge. They’ll never let you go.”

Nausea roiled in Alastor’s stomach and for a moment, he couldn’t breathe as the stench of alcohol and cigarettes and sex assaulted his memory, confusing his senses. Then he realised that it wasn’t his memory providing the smell - it was Valentino. His body reeked of tobacco

and whisky and the stink of sex clung permanently to him like a second skin beneath his garishly sweet perfume.

Alastor faltered in his attack, caught off-guard by a wave of fresh panic, and the shadows slackened their grip, allowing Valentino to ram his fist into Alastor's stomach. Alastor grunted and renewed his hold on Valentino's throat, and the moth-demon gagged and clawed at his back and sides, tearing through his clothes and leaving bloody gashes in his wake.

Alastor hissed as a knee connected with his stomach and suddenly, Valentino flipped their positions and Alastor was beneath the much larger demon, pressed into the floor by his body. His panic soared to new heights and his shadows reared above them, whipping and beating Valentino's body hard enough to bring tears to his eyes as his flesh opened up, clothes growing saturated with crimson.

A whimper escaped Alastor as Valentino kissed him hard once more, tongue forcing past his lips as venom dripped down his throat. He froze for a moment before shoving frantically at Valentino, but Valentino clutched tightly at his hair and curled his fingers around his neck, keeping him place.

Alastor's heart galloped like a spooked horse and his ears were pinned to his skull as his tail stood tall and erect in warning. His fingers bit into the carpet and his breaths were shallow and quick. A deer in headlights.

He could feel his own body betraying him, growing interested at the pressure above him because of the effects of the venom. It was happening again. His mind was sick and twisted and he was *enjoying* the violation like he did the last time it happened. His trousers grew tight and he wanted to vomit, wanted to *scream*. White noise filled the air and Alastor realised he was trembling.

He pushed hard at Valentino, forcing him upright, but Valentino dragged Alastor with him by his hair and neck and his lower set of hands grabbed Alastor's wrists.

"Please, stop," Alastor tried to beg but his words were muffled by Valentino's mouth.

His shaking worsened and Valentino abruptly tore away from him, chest heaving and eyes wide.

They stared at each other for a long moment, a tense silence stretching between them and Alastor couldn't think of anything but wandering hands and pain and humiliation and *what was Valentino going to do to him? What had he done to deserve this? Why was the moth-demon being so cruel?* He couldn't concentrate enough to summon his shadows and he caught sight of his silhouette frozen with fear in the corner of the room, a terrified expression on its face.

There was a knock at the door.

They whipped their heads around to face it.

"Vox," Alastor whimpered before he could stop himself and Valentino's eyes widened even further before he launched to his feet and raced towards the door.

Without thinking, Alastor pounced on him and they struggled for a few seconds before Valentino kicked out and managed to slip free of Alastor's grasp. He made it two steps before Alastor's silhouette ripped a chunk of fur from his ruff, and he howled.

There was the sound of the lock turning and Alastor's breath hitched as he remembered that he had given Vox a spare key.

Vox rushed into the hallway with a panicked expression as blue bolts of electricity danced over his fingers. He stared in horror at the mess in front of him - at the blood and bruises and ripped flesh between them both, at Alastor's shaking frame and his silhouette's fearful gaze, at Valentino's horrified face...

His expression darkened and Alastor couldn't think of enough words to defend himself, couldn't think of much at all, really, as he shrunk away from Vox's budding fury.

“Vox,” Valentino whispered, something akin to relief colouring his tone, but it was short-lived as Vox abruptly discharged a burst of electricity into Valentino, blasting him into the wall. Valentino crumpled onto the floor with a whimper.

“Stay down, asshole,” Vox snarled before he dropped to his knees in front of Alastor, expression distraught as he placed himself between the two battered Overlords.

“What did he do to you? Where are you hurt? Talk to me, Al. Are you okay?” The questions came as a frantic barrage and Alastor could barely focus on them as he tried to fight back wave after wave of degrading memories.

“Vox, I-”

Another burst of electricity and Valentino doubled over in agony.

“Shut up,” hissed Vox and the air crackled with static, a blue charge visible between his antennae, burning brighter and thicker as his anger flared. “I’ll deal with you in a moment.”

His worried gaze returned to Alastor. “Talk to me, Smiles. What happened? What did he do?” He reached out and laid a gentle hand against Alastor’s cheek.

The reaction was instinctive. Alastor’s skin crawled and the memories had his fear spiking.

He slammed his knuckles into Vox’s screen.

Vox’s face glitched for a few seconds as a spider web of cracks tracked through the specialised glass. Vox stared at the floor for a long moment, stunned, before slowly raising his gaze to Alastor’s horrified expression.

Alastor couldn’t *breathe*. And then the breaths came too fast and his muscles tensed and his head grew light as bile crawled up his throat.

“It’s okay,” Vox said gently. “Just breathe, Al. It’s alright.”

It wasn’t alright. He had attacked Vox. He was no better than Vox’s parents, than the people who hit him under the pretence of caring about him. He was no better than the one-night stands that abused the Television Demon.

The air felt hot. His vision swam. He could still smell the foul stench of cigarettes and sex and alcohol, and it invaded his body like a toxin, triggering more memories, merging them with the *here and now* until he couldn’t differentiate between past and present.

His body *hurt* and he curled in on himself. Had Valentino been there that night? He couldn’t remember...

“Al, look at me,” came a kind voice (was it kind or was it just pretending to be?) and Alastor peered up at Vox through his bangs. Vox with his cracked screen. Alastor’s chest burned with guilt.

Vox smiled sadly. “You’re safe. I won’t let him hurt you again.”

A lie. Alastor wasn’t *safe*. Vox didn’t understand. Vox didn’t know what Valentino had threatened. Vox had no idea what Alastor was hiding. Vox wasn’t *prey* like Alastor was.

His gaze drifted past Vox’s shoulder to Valentino, who had managed to pull himself into a sitting position, slumped against the wall. He stared at Alastor silently and Alastor’s throat dried.

Alastor shook his head slowly, heart thumping loudly in his chest. The longer he stared at Valentino’s hollow expression, the more nauseated he felt. *How many people would Valentino tell? How quickly would they come for him?*

“I promise I won’t let him hurt you anymore,” Vox whispered with a small frown before his gaze softened. “You know I’ll always take your side. You know I’ll always defend you.”

Alastor couldn’t tear his gaze away from Valentino’s rapidly forming scowl.

“You know I love you,” Vox said quietly, reaching for Alastor’s shaking hands.

His hands were being restrained. He was about to be pinned down. Alastor’s panic surged and he blindly commanded his shadows to wrap around Vox and throw him across the room. The Television Demon landed on the floor with a heavy *thud* and Alastor’s shadows reared high above him, ready to deal the next blow. Vox’s eyes widened.

Suddenly, Valentino was on Alastor, pinning him to the floor face-down, and white, hot fear flooded Alastor’s veins. He struggled like a feral animal, lashing out with shadows and claws alike at anything close enough for him to reach.

There were two separate cries of pain and Alastor managed to kick Valentino away from him.

“Alastor!”

Alastor threw a wild look at Vox and the primitive animalistic fear inside him was overridden by icy horror.

Vox’s entire screen was dark, the glass completely shattered and his boxy casing was cracked and smoking. His suit was torn and he cradled his arm close to his chest, clearly injured. He had pressed himself against the wall, cowering from Alastor’s shadows.

Alastor stared, frozen.

“Alastor,” Vox said again, gentler this time, *afraid*. “Al, please. Please calm down. Please stop.”

“You’ve *blinded* him,” Valentino hissed angrily and Alastor flinched.

“One more word out of you and I’ll pump you with so much charge that you’ll be able to get a job as a damn pylon!” Vox snarled.

“I’m defending you!” Valentino protested.

“I shouldn’t have trusted you,” Vox spat. “Al was right. You’re a piece of shit.”

“I’m not the one that attacked you!”

He was correct. Alastor had attacked Vox and Valentino had been the one to try to protect him. Alastor’s breaths came fast and shallow.

Valentino wouldn’t hurt Vox. He *liked* Vox. Alastor was the broken one. The one who had lost his composure. *He* was the one who had hurt the man he was supposed to treasure.

Bile crawled up his throat as he caught sight of the blood staining Vox’s clothes. The blood *he* had caused.

He should leave before he hurt Vox again.

He staggered to his feet, chest aching when Vox couldn’t quite locate where he was, dark screen facing a foot or so left of Alastor.

“Al?” Vox called when Alastor remained silent.

Alastor looked around his demolished hallway before glancing at the glowering Valentino. He swallowed.

He took one step backwards, then another, and he disappeared into the shadows.

“Alastor?” Vox asked when he received no response. The room was so *quiet*...

“He’s gone,” Valentino muttered and he sounded bitter, or perhaps angry. It was difficult to tell.

“You’re lying,” growled Vox, allowing electricity to spark between his fingers in warning. “What have you done to him?”

“Nothing. He’s gone. He just... vanished.”

“Liar,” Vox snarled. “He wouldn’t leave me like this. He wouldn’t leave me blind and facing *you* alone. What have you done?”

“Nothing!” Valentino snapped. “He left!”

Fear struck Vox’s chest alongside a surprising sense of grief that almost winded him. He pressed his back against the wall. “Alastor!” he shouted, panicked, and Valentino clicked his tongue.

“He’s not here, Vox.” The voice sounded closer.

“What did you do?” Vox hissed, gathering charge quickly. “Why were you fighting? Why were you at his *house*?” Alastor couldn’t have left him alone, could he? Had he passed out?

Was that why he wasn't answering?

There was a pause. "I came to talk to him," Valentino said and there was regret in his tone; enough for Vox to know that Valentino was hiding something.

"About what?" he demanded. "Why were you fighting? What did you say to upset him?"

"Why do you assume I'm the one at fault?" Valentino asked, hurt.

"Because everything was fine before you showed up!" Vox snapped. "*We* were fine until you came into our lives." He shook his head angrily at himself. "I should have listened to him. He told me you were trouble. I thought you just needed a friend. I felt *sorry* for you."

"Because he's so *perfect*," growled Valentino and the sound came from beside Vox, making him scramble away in surprise. "Because he's so *innocent*." There was a small pause. "*Mierda*. I never wanted any of this to happen," Valentino whispered and his voice cracked. "I didn't *want* to make him feel..." He trailed off, sounding distressed, and Vox scowled.

"Bullshit! I saw what you did to him! I saw the blood and bruises! What did you *say*?"

"...He's keeping secrets from you," Valentino said slowly. "Terrible secrets. I... I confronted him about them."

"What secrets?" Vox demanded. "And why do *you* know about them?"

There was another stretch of silence before Valentino sighed quietly. "It isn't my story to tell." A hand tilted his screen up and Vox grabbed Valentino's wrist and poured charge through him. Valentino yelped and leapt away.

"I'm trying to check the damage, asshole!"

“Put your filthy hands on me again and I’ll melt your skin off,” Vox said lowly. “What secrets? What did you say to him that had him so *afraid*?”

“...Just that I knew what he was hiding.”

“Which is?”

“It really isn’t my place to tell.”

Valentino screamed as Vox lunged forwards and blasted him with electricity. He pulled away when the moth-demon began to smell of burning flesh and Valentino whimpered.

“Get out,” whispered Vox. “If I *ever* catch you near him again, I’ll kill you. And you can consider yourself fired.”

“Vox...” Valentino choked out and Vox’s antennae sparked in warning.

“ *Get out!* ”

There was the sound of Valentino scrambling to obey and the door slammed behind him.

The moment Vox was certain he was gone, he crawled across the floor, searching blindly for Alastor’s unconscious body. After a few minutes, his chest was tight with the realisation that Alastor had indeed left him alone to face Valentino.

Vox sighed shakily and let his damaged head thunk back against the wall. First he would get his screen fixed, then he would find Alastor and bring him home, safe and sound, and they would *talk*.

There had to be a reason that Alastor had abandoned him.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Alastor having his trauma used against him, acephobic comments

I love it when everyone is miserable, don't you? ;)

UPDATE: Some lovely heartbreaking art by the wonderful ShimNan:
<https://twitter.com/NaroJunipo/status/1803534958138630306?s=19>

Chapter 19: Crossed Wires

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Vox had always been a place of safety for Alastor. Wherever the Television Demon was, Alastor felt secure by his side.

Since Vox wasn't an option now, the radio tower would have to suffice as Alastor's sanctuary.

He pressed his back against the wall, knees to his chest and hands in his hair. He had already pulled out a few strands and his skull ached - although, the pain of a few torn hairs paled in comparison to the agony of knowing that he had hurt Vox, not to mention the fear and stress mounting inside him from Valentino's threat.

He could still taste Valentino's mouth against his, feel his venom sliding down his throat, his palm slipping between his legs...

He trembled, then scowled and made a frustrated sound as he clutched his hair tighter.

He was trapped. He couldn't kill Valentino because the moth-demon would reveal his secret to all of Hell once he regenerated, but how could he possibly stop seeing Vox? Twenty years of friendship coming to such an abrupt end was absurd. Vox would know something was wrong. He was clever; he would figure out that Valentino had threatened Alastor.

And then what? Would Valentino punish Alastor for Vox's perceptiveness? Would he tell all of Hell anyway? Or would he target Vox instead? Try to convince him that Alastor was soiled? Damaged?

He smirked bitterly. Vox would never think of him like that. Valentino was a *fool*. And if he told all of Hell about Alastor's secret, Vox would remain by his side because the Television Demon *loved him*.

Valentino was a desperate idiot.

A shame, really. After learning of what Valentino had been through, Alastor had hoped the moth-demon would be better than this; better than senseless threats and cruelty. He had hoped that, just this once, he had been *wrong*, that Valentino was everything Vox thought of him; everything Vox *wanted* him to be.

Instead, he was like every other sinner; wicked and malicious and opportunistic.

Alastor grit his teeth and pressed his thighs together. It might have been nice to have another friend - someone he and Vox could have learned to trust. Alas, it was not to be.

“Alastor?”

He snapped his gaze up at the soft voice, pain lancing his heart at the sight of Vox standing beneath one of the lights, one hand on the wall and screen still smashed. So lost in ruminations, Alastor hadn't heard him materialise.

“Al, are you there?” His voice was quiet, careful and Alastor's ears lowered as guilt threatened to drown him.

Vox's other hand reached in front of him, as though he truly believed that Alastor was *right there*, in front of him. The sight had Alastor's stomach clenching.

“...I can feel your static,” Vox whispered after a few moments. “I know you're here somewhere.” His shoulders slumped and Alastor was struck by how expressive the Television Demon was even without a face.

If he wasn't careful, someone might use that against him.

“I’m here,” Alastor murmured and Vox’s head snapped to him. He staggered towards Alastor a few steps, then froze, looking quite lost in the centre of the room. He raised a hand then thought better of it and planted his feet.

“I went home and tried to replace my screen,” Vox said, tapping his fingers restlessly against his thigh. “But, uh... I’m not used to doing it on my own. Turns out I... Turns out I *need* you.” An awkward laugh. “But that’s nothing new, is it?”

Alastor climbed slowly to his feet and crossed the distance between them. He placed gentle hands on Vox’s screen, waiting for a flinch, waiting for anger or mistrust, and was surprised when Vox sighed with relief, relaxing against his palms.

Alastor swallowed a lump in his throat. *This beautiful man...*

He focused on repairing broken components and reshaping jagged glass, and soon, Vox was staring at him with a sad but grateful smile, curling his fingers slowly around Alastor’s wrists.

Even after Alastor had hurt him, *broken* him, Vox couldn’t keep his hands off Alastor for very long.

“Thank you,” Vox whispered and bile crawled up Alastor’s throat. Why was Vox thanking him? He had caused the damage.

Vox rubbed his thumbs over the pulse points in Alastor’s wrists, reassuringly, *lovingly*.

“Are you okay?” Vox asked softly and Alastor wanted to scream. Vox was always so understanding, so forgiving. Alastor really didn’t deserve him...

He nodded.

A frown pinched Vox's expression and Alastor missed a breath when Vox cupped his cheek tenderly. "You're not."

Alastor couldn't help but lean into the comforting palm. His eyes fluttered shut and he felt his pulse slow as Vox rubbed his thumb adoringly over his cheek bone.

"Tell me what happened," Vox whispered. "Tell me what he said to you to cause *this*."

Alastor's eyes flew open and he caught Vox's gaze, tongue growing thick and heavy in his mouth. Panic swept over him unexpectedly and Vox raised his eyebrows at the rapidly increasing static in the air.

"It's okay," Vox soothed, slowly snaking his free arm around Alastor's waist as the Radio Demon's ears pinned to his skull. "You're safe with me, Al. You know I'll always stay by your side, no matter what happens."

Except that was the *problem*. If Vox stayed by Alastor's side, Valentino would tell all of Hell what Alastor had been through, what he had *done*. Alastor couldn't go back to running and hiding and being *hunted*.

"Easy, Smiles," Vox murmured, fingers sliding from his cheek to his ear, massaging, petting. "Breathe. Valentino's gone. It's just you and me."

For now, maybe. But when Valentino told everyone that Alastor was easy to pin down, they would be swarmed with company.

Alastor inhaled sharply. What if they tried to rape Vox too?

His breathing quickened. Vox would fight for him until he was overwhelmed. He would stay by Alastor's side just as he had promised and he would fight until his body gave out from exhaustion and he would throw himself in front of Alastor to protect him, just like he had all

those years ago when Alastor's silhouette had attacked him. Vox was loyal and sweet and brave and he didn't deserve to face the trauma that Alastor had.

He didn't deserve to be broken like Alastor was.

"Al, hey, hey! Come back to me. Come back to me, my love."

It was a slip, one Vox obviously hadn't expected, and his screen tinged pink as he tried to calm Alastor's rising panic, but the slip was enough to hammer home how tangled Vox was in the Radio Demon's predicament.

Alastor felt sick. If anything happened to Vox because of him...

He tore out of Vox's grip, trying to think, trying to breathe, trying to stop shaking, and the static built until he could hear it popping and crackling in the air.

Vox caught his arm, halting his pacing, and he fixed Alastor with a serious look.

"Whatever has upset you, we can face it together. I promise. You can't scare me away."

Alastor swallowed thickly, unable to speak. He wanted nothing more than to bury himself in Vox's arms and believe that everything would work out fine, that they would be okay, that Vox could *protect* him.

But he wasn't naive. And he couldn't let Vox be dragged into his horrific mess. He couldn't let Vox be *soiled*. He was the one who had to protect Vox; his perfect, darling picturebox.

"Relax, Al," Vox said gently, brows furrowing in concern. "Let me-"

“I need you to leave,” Alastor whispered, his heart clenching painfully.

Vox blinked, surprised, before he shook his head. “I know you’re scared-”

“I need you to go!” Alastor snapped, radio filters thick with interference as he ripped his arm from Vox’s grip.

Vox watched him calmly. “Tell me why you want me to go.”

Alastor licked his lips, caught off-guard by the question. “I need... I want...” He trailed off and realised that he was trembling violently.

Vox’s gaze softened. “I’m not leaving you like this. I won’t let you suffer alone. You should know that by now.”

He did. He knew that very well. Vox would never leave him in this state, even though Alastor had left Vox blind and broken a couple of hours earlier.

He didn’t deserve Vox.

Still, Vox reached for him. “Come here. Let me hold you.”

Alastor stared at him with wide eyes. He wanted that. He wanted so dearly to be held by his picturebox. It would be so easy to give in.

He had to stay strong. He had to keep Vox safe.

He stepped back and Vox’s expression faltered. For the first time, there was a hint of distress in his gaze.

“Don’t leave me again,” he whispered, voice cracking.

Alastor wanted to vomit. He had hurt Vox and abandoned him and still the Television Demon had checked on Alastor first.

Just as Valentino had used Alastor’s trauma against him, Alastor had rekindled Vox’s abandonment issues.

“Please, talk to me,” Vox begged and Alastor could see the fear in his gaze, the fear of being abandoned again, of being tossed away like trash. Alastor had done a number on him without even realising it.

Perhaps Valentino was right. Perhaps Vox was better off without him...

He took another step backwards and Vox’s face contorted with panic as charge bounced between his antennae. His screen glitched and he raised both hands. “Al, please! Please don’t run. Please, I don’t... I don’t understand what...” He shook his head, distress mounting. “Why won’t you talk to me?”

Alastor felt as though he were suddenly drowning. What was he doing? Why was he hurting the man he loved? Why wasn’t he *explaining* what had happened? Surely trying to protect him wasn’t supposed to be like this? He had made a mistake in leaving Vox, but he could fix it, couldn’t he? Twenty years of friendship wasn’t going to be free of mistakes, but hadn’t they always worked through them together? Hadn’t they always confided in each other? Hadn’t they always trusted each other?

“Valentino found out that I-” he blurted before his tongue abruptly stopped working and he found himself unable to continue as bile crawled up his throat.

Vox stared at him hopefully, *desperately*. “Found out that you...?”

Alastor's throat *clicked* before he clamped his mouth shut and he stared at Vox.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't tell him what had happened.

Because if Vox knew what had happened to Alastor in life, if Vox found out that Valentino had threatened him in such a way, then Vox would *never* give up fighting for Alastor, no matter how many demons turned their frustrated attentions to him instead.

And if Valentino was desperate to have Vox, all the moth-demon would have to do is threaten Alastor and Vox would do *anything* Valentino asked.

Maybe even give up his soul.

Alastor couldn't let that happen. He couldn't let himself be used as a way for other sinners to take advantage of Vox.

"...That I'm on a chain," Alastor heard himself say, which wasn't entirely a lie.

Vox swallowed and edged towards him. "Okay. That's... That's okay. It's not ideal, but we can... We can fix this." He hesitated, looking confused. "Is that really why you were fighting or did he say something else? Did he... threaten you in some way? Because I can't imagine you getting this... *distressed* over him finding out about your chain. I know you don't particularly like him but..." He trailed off awkwardly.

Vox knew him too well. Of course he did.

Alastor scrambled desperately for a response, for a *lie*, and Vox offered him a tentative smile as his static prickled the Television Demon's skin. "Hey, it's okay," he cooed, like Alastor was a frightened animal. "Come here, Al. I promise we'll figure this out. You and me, together." He opened his arms in invitation and Alastor could feel his own resolve crumbling.

“I can’t,” Alastor whispered, shaking his head as he planted his feet firmly, and his chest tightened when Vox’s expression dimmed, hurt flashing quickly across his face.

“Tell me why,” Vox said gently, arms still open. “Tell me why you’re holding back.”

Alastor swallowed down the feeling of nausea. “I can’t be what you want me to be.”

He couldn’t let Vox endure what he had. He couldn’t knowingly break his picturebox. He wanted Vox with all of his heart, but he wouldn’t allow himself to be selfish, not with Valentino’s threat hanging above his head like a guillotine. Not when he knew that Vox would throw himself in the way of anyone that might try to harm Alastor.

Vox’s arms fell limply to his sides and his expression cracked into one of heartache.

“Alastor,” he said quietly, firmly. “I would never ask you for more than you were willing to give. I want you to feel safe with me. I want you to feel that you never have to lie to me or hide things from me. I want to make you happy. I want to be your best friend, the person you know you can trust with anything. I want to make you laugh. I want to hold you, to relax you at the end of a long day. I want to sit and talk to you into the ridiculous hours of the morning, about everything and nothing. I want to watch you succeed at everything you do and I want to fight by your side when things don’t go to plan.”

He gazed hopefully at Alastor. “I love you. All I ask is that you let me.”

Shit.

It was everything Alastor wanted. *Vox* was everything Alastor wanted, but if he said ‘yes’, how quickly would it all be ruined by Valentino’s threat? He couldn’t do that to Vox. He couldn’t put him in danger like that. Alastor would never forgive himself if Vox was *violated* by Hell’s demons, or taken advantage of by Valentino.

Silence stretched between them and Vox’s face started to fall.

“I know you feel it too,” Vox whispered. “I *know* you do. You’ve shown me more times than I can count. I *know* you love me.”

“...No,” Alastor said, shaking his head even as pain lanced his chest. “You’re wrong.”

Vox frowned. “You’re lying. I can see it. You’re trying to push me away because you’re scared. What did he say to you? What did Valentino do to you?”

He should have known that Vox would be more perceptive than that. “I’ve already told you. I can’t be what you want me to be, Vox.”

“Bullshit,” Vox growled and Alastor watched anger flicker across his screen. “What did he do to you? We were fine until he showed up at your house.” He searched Alastor’s face for something before his eyes widened a fraction. “Did he... Did he *touch* you?”

Uncomfortable heat swept through Alastor’s body as his heart raced. That guess was a little too close to the mark for Alastor’s liking. He must have hesitated a fraction too long because Vox bristled, electricity sparking between his antennae as his left eye swirled hypnotically for a moment before he forced it to stop.

“I’ll kill him,” Vox snarled, filters heavy in his voice. “I’ll rip his arms off! I’ll tear his tongue out of his head! I’ll chop his damn dick off!”

“He didn’t,” Alastor managed, trying not to press his thighs together, trying to forget how Valentino’s tongue had tasted in his mouth, how his palm had felt between his legs.

The electricity between Vox’s antennae faded. “He’s obviously done something. I’ve *never* seen you like this. I should kill him for making you feel this way,” Vox growled.

No! Bad idea! Alastor's heart pounded as his breathing picked up speed. His stomach rolled and he began to sweat. His tail stood to attention, flashing its underside in warning and his ears remained flat to his skull.

"You need to leave," he said quickly. "I can't... I need you to leave. Valentino did nothing. I don't want this. I don't want you."

Vox looked crushed. "What did he *do* to you?"

"Nothing!" Alastor snapped, dials flickering in his eyes. "This has nothing to do with him! I don't want you, Vox! You've built this fantasy in your head about what you *think* I want, but I don't! I don't want any of this! I don't feel anything for you!"

Push him away. Keep him safe. Get him away from the predators. Protect your herd; protect him like you failed to protect your parents.

Vox's mouth drew into a thin line. "Look me in the eye and tell me you weren't taking me to that restaurant to ask me to be yours."

Alastor stared at him, eyes round and huge, ears flinging upright at being startled. Words fled his tongue and he opened and closed his mouth twice before swallowing.

Vox smiled sadly. "If you think I'll give up on you that easily, then I'm sorry to disappoint."

Alastor stepped backwards towards the edge of the room and Vox straightened, alarmed, arm shooting towards Alastor. "Wait!"

Alastor disappeared into the shadows.

Valentino slumped over his dining table, ignoring the black coffee growing colder in front of him.

He hadn't slept at all last night and his body ached and protested every movement he made, but he couldn't help but think he deserved the pain for what he had done.

He tried to reason with himself that he had been forced into the fight with Alastor, that he never would have threatened the Radio Demon if the lady in the bookshop hadn't made him, but those thoughts didn't make him feel any less dirty.

Alastor was an asshole, but he didn't deserve to have his secrets exposed to all of Hell. He didn't deserve to have his past used against him in such a way, but what else could Valentino have done? If the bookshop lady was always watching, always listening, if she held that much power that if Valentino disobeyed her, she could burn him to a crisp, what was he supposed to do? If he had confessed to Alastor that he was being forced into threatening him, would the lady in the bookshop have set him alight there and then? Would she have killed him before he had even finished his explanation?

He had been too afraid to risk it. He had expected Alastor to attack him, and his response was a defence mechanism built from having drugged saliva, from using his body to distract those who would try to harm him.

Still, he felt guilty about putting his hand between Alastor's legs, knowing what the Radio Demon had faced. The kiss should have been enough, but he had underestimated Alastor's panic and the strength he gained from adrenaline, and Valentino had instinctively tried to distract him with pleasure, forgetting for a moment that his groping would have the opposite effect.

He had been so angry and afraid and the acidic words had fallen from his tongue easily, because how was it fair that Alastor had the affection of the one person that had shown any regard for Valentino? How was it fair that Vox had fallen for a jerk like Alastor?

But the words were also filled with frustration, because for a moment, Alastor hadn't been an asshole. For a gentle, sweet moment, Alastor had looked at him as he stood on the doorstep,

really looked at him, and there had been concern in his gaze. Valentino had seen the potential for them to become friends in that moment, had seen what Vox obviously saw in the Radio Demon, and then Alastor had invited him in for tea and it was too much. He had wanted to tell Alastor everything, to beg him not to drag him back to the lady in the bookshop.

He had been disgusted with himself the moment he revealed what he knew. The words had come out all wrong because he hadn't wanted to say them, but not saying them would have resulted in his own torture and demise, so he had tried to tip Alastor off, tried to show him that something wasn't quite right, that he was being forced to say such things.

'If you're disobedient. I'll tell him.'

'He'll think you vile for what you... what you let... What you went through.'

'...You should really learn to respect your master.'

'I don't... I never wanted...'

He had tried. He had tried hard to clue Alastor in, but nothing had worked. The Radio Demon was too upset, too angry, and his insults had made Valentino angry.

'You'll never be able to give Vox what he wants.'

He scowled and pressed his nails into his head, just to feel the sting. He'd let his jealousy get the better of him and he hated himself for it. If Alastor hadn't wanted to drag him back to the bookshop before, now he certainly did.

A frustrated growl escaped him. They could have been friends. None of this should ever have happened. Alastor had been willing to delay his date with Vox to check that Valentino was alright... and Valentino had repaid him by threatening to reveal his best-kept secret.

And now, Vox hated him too.

He was alone again.

“Mierda!” he snarled, picking up the coffee cup and throwing it against the wall. It shattered and the coffee left a dark stain on the paint.

His vision blurred, tears threatening to spill down his cheeks.

Why was he destined to be miserable and lonely, even in death? What had he done to deserve this fate? He had tried to take care of the women his lover had put him in charge of escorting. He had entertained his lover’s friends whenever he had ordered it. He had spent years trying to keep his lover happy - a lover that had never given two shits about him. He had dealt a few drugs, sure, waved his guns around to scare people, but he had never killed anyone in life. He had only started doing drugs with his lover because it was one of the few times the man seemed to compliment him - the only time his lover showed him any sort of tender affection.

He wiped his eyes with the back of a hand. Was he really such a terrible person in life that he deserved an eternity of loneliness? Of not mattering to anyone?

Maybe he should throw himself in front of an Exorcist’s blade during the next extermination. It wasn’t as though anyone would miss him and that was a preferable death compared to whatever Alastor or bookshop lady had in store for him.

There was a soft buzzing and the lights dimmed briefly before Valentino’s head was suddenly slammed against the table. One of his arms was twisted painfully behind his back and he reached blindly behind him with his lower set of arms, digging his claws into whatever soft flesh he could reach.

“What did you do to him?” hissed a familiar voice and the words cracked with despair.

Valentino stilled, quickly removing his claws from Vox’s sides.

“Nothing,” he whispered.

“He won’t talk to me,” snarled Vox. “You did *something*.”

“We spoke and fought a little. I did nothing,” Valentino said quietly.

He groaned as Vox smashed his head against the table again. “We were fine!” he snapped and Valentino could hear the desperation in his tone, the grief and anguish. “Everything was going well before you came along! He was happy! *We* were happy! And you... You ruined *everything*.” There was a small pause before Vox finally released Valentino and stepped backwards, chest heaving with anger. Valentino faced him slowly, a headache blossoming.

Vox glared at him. “He always lets me in. He always trusts me. We share every problem. Now he’ll barely even look at me. What did you *say*?”

Valentino swallowed. “I already told you; I revealed that I know some of his secrets. That’s it.”

Vox’s face glitched. It was a strange, if not alarming sight. His voice stuttered when he next spoke, like a speaker about to blow. “*What secrets?*”

Shoulders slumping, Valentino frowned. “They aren’t my place to tell,” he said and he meant it. If Vox didn’t know what Alastor had been through, then that meant that the Radio Demon didn’t want to tell him. The lady in the bookshop hadn’t said anything about revealing such secrets to Vox if Alastor followed her orders, so Valentino had no intention of making things worse - of traumatising Alastor further.

Vox's face glitched again and he growled and put a hand to his screen as though the glitching physically pained him. Valentino's nails bit into his palms to stop himself from reaching out.

He wanted to tell Vox everything about the bookshop, about what had happened. He wanted to fix the gaping abyss of hatred and despair that had opened up between them, but would the lady in the bookshop kill him on the spot? She hadn't said much about revealing things to Vox, but should he really risk it? Vox would find a way to fix things with Alastor if he knew the truth – Vox *always* found a way to fix things, so Valentino would likely be punished for helping him.

Damn it, but it hurt seeing Vox this distressed.

"Did you touch him?" Vox demanded suddenly, electricity bouncing between his antennae and Valentino frowned in confusion.

"...We fought?"

"Did you touch him?" Vox snarled and finally, Valentino caught on. He straightened.

"No."

"If I find out you're lying-"

"I kissed him. Drugged him to help me escape," said Valentino firmly. "I did what I had to so I could get away from him. I'd never... I'd never *rape* anyone, if that's what you're asking." He grimaced, shuddering slightly at the thought.

Vox clenched his fists then dropped his gaze. His static tickled Valentino's antennae.

Valentino's chest felt far too tight. "I'm sorry, Vox. I never wanted this to happen."

Vox whipped his gaze up and threw Valentino a look brimming with loathing. “Why then? Why did you confront him? Why make him feel this way? Do you have any idea how long it has taken me to get him to open up? Do you have any idea how hard it is to earn his trust? Do you have any idea what he’s been through?”

More than you can imagine.

“I didn’t want to confront him, I-” *I was forced to.* Valentino clamped his mouth shut. He had already revealed too much.

Vox frowned and Valentino watched in horror as the wheels in his mind began to turn; he watched as Vox slowly began piecing the puzzle together despite Valentino’s best efforts to keep things vague.

Vox’s gaze drifted to the shattered coffee cup on the floor, then to the stain on the wall. “...What exactly were you hoping to get out of confronting him?” Vox asked slowly. “What was the point? The end goal?”

Valentino floundered and Vox narrowed his eyes at Valentino’s silence.

“Alastor said you talked about his chain. You haven’t visited any bookshops recently, have you?”

Mierda!

Valentino was hit by the memory of fire and smoke and the stench of burning flesh. His skin prickled with heat. Vox was too smart for his own good and Valentino would be the one who suffered for it.

“I wanted him to stay away from you,” Valentino blurted since it was the first thing that popped into his head that would make any sense. “I... I wanted you for myself. I was jealous. I... I threatened him. Fought him.”

Vox stared for a moment, eyes wide, before he bared his teeth and electricity danced across his frame. “You *what?*”

“I was desperate,” Valentino said quickly, scraping the lie together and shaping it the best he could into something plausible, despite how pathetic it made him sound. “You’re the only person who has ever been truly kind to me and... and I was feeling low. Alastor seemed like an obstacle and I... I let my feelings get the better of me. I’m sorry, Vox. I shouldn’t have done it.”

Vox looked *furious*. “All this over a stupid crush?” he hissed before he jabbed a finger in Valentino’s direction. “Get this through your thick skull: I will *never* want you, Valentino. I was nice to you because I felt sorry for you, because you’re pathetic to the point of pitiful. But don’t you *ever* confuse that for me giving a *damn* what happens to you. You mean nothing to me.”

Valentino flinched. Nothing new there, yet it didn’t hurt any less to hear Vox confirm what everyone always thought of Valentino. That he didn’t matter. That he meant nothing to everybody.

There was a pause and Vox stared at him, mouth pressed into a thin line. His gaze wasn’t as hard as Valentino had expected it to be, but there was definite anger there.

“You’ll apologise to him,” Vox ordered. “If you’re very lucky, he’ll let you go with all your limbs intact.”

Valentino closed his eyes. He should have expected that.

“You’ll fix this,” Vox growled. “And if you don’t, if you try to avoid the mess you’ve made, I’ll destroy those ridiculous feelings you have for me. I’ll make you regret meeting me.”

Valentino nodded, subdued. He couldn't apologise to Alastor without the lady in the bookshop erasing him from existence, but Vox didn't need to know that he wasn't going to follow his orders.

He needed time to think of a plan. A way out.

He needed to return to the bookshop. To speak to the disembodied voice and tell her that her plan wouldn't work, that Vox and Alastor's love for each other was far too strong, that Vox was too clever and Alastor too cunning. Valentino had no chance of getting between them and he didn't *want* to.

Surely, she'd let him go if he proved useless to her? Why even waste effort in killing him?

...And then... And then he could apologise to Vox and Alastor. Explain to them what had happened. Explain to them that he had been forced to hurt them, to separate them. Maybe they would give him another chance? Maybe... Maybe he'd mean something to them? Maybe they would like him, just a little? Maybe Vox would offer him his job back?

That was a good plan. He would go to the bookshop tonight and show her that her plan was failing and she would let him go.

Vox frowned at him for a moment before shaking his head. "Fix this," he commanded, but his voice was a little softer than it had been earlier and it was enough to give Valentino hope that all was not lost between him and the two media demons.

"I will," he said firmly, with as much conviction as he could manage.

Vox pursed his lips before zipping into the lights and vanishing from Valentino's home.

In another universe, Valentino would have told Vox the truth and quickly found out that The Voice has no power outside the bookshop...

Chapter 20: Trials And Tribulations

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom (TAKE HEED)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Valentino slipped into the dark bookshop under the cover of nightfall. The moment he closed the door behind him, the lock clicked and a lamp flipped on in the far corner of the room of its own accord, its orange glow visible above the maze of bookcases.

Not ominous at all.

He swallowed and made his way towards the singular light, weaving through the shelves of books and coming to a halt in front of an old, worn leather armchair and a small side table holding an ornate lamp.

Valentino glanced up at the ceiling. “It won’t work. This plan of separating Vox and Alastor. They care for each other far too much.” He pressed his lips together for a moment, hesitating. “And I don’t want to separate them. Love is rare in Hell, yet against all odds and despite everything they have both faced... they seem to have found it with each other. I have no right to destroy that, regardless of my own feelings.”

The silence stretched on.

“I’m of no use to you,” Valentino said, unease prickling at the back of his mind. “Let me go. I can’t help you.”

There was laughter, soft as a cool breeze.

“The plan is already in motion.”

Valentino frowned. “What? No. Vox hates me. He’s still fixated on Alastor. They’ll get back together soon enough.”

“The plan is working.”

Valentino clenched his fists. “Didn’t you hear me? Vox is determined to stick by Alastor’s side. All your plan has succeeded in is making both Alastor and Vox despise me.”

“Patience, sweet lovebug. Vox will be yours soon enough,” purred The Voice.

“You’re delusional,” Valentino said through gritted teeth. “Vox hates me and I don’t *want* him to be mine if it means putting both of them through this agony. I never wanted this. Your plan failed. They’ll start talking soon enough.”

“Alastor won’t talk as long as your threat still stands. He won’t risk his secret getting out.”

Valentino stared at the ceiling for a long while before he squared his jaw. “Then I’ll reveal that there was no threat.”

There was a pause and Valentino shifted his weight uncomfortably. “I’ve never seen two demons love one another so fiercely. Your plan was never going to work. Vox attacked me without question once he saw that Alastor was hurt. Vox is distraught without him - he threatened me in my own home, demanded I apologise to Alastor, that I fix things.” He scowled. “And I want to. You’ll have to find someone else to play your game. Or if you’re that set on punishing Alastor for whatever he’s done, do it yourself.”

The lights flickered. “You seem to think you have a choice in all of this.”

Fear trickled into Valentino’s gut. “I can’t help you. You might as well let me go.”

“Even if you were useless to me, what makes you think I’d let you go? You know too much. And I’ve never been one to miss a meal...”

Valentino’s eyes widened and panic gripped his chest as the stench of smoke filled his nostrils. He looked around wildly but couldn’t locate the fire.

“What do you want from me?” Valentino asked angrily, but his expression betrayed his fear as he backed against the wall, gaze darting from left to right. He could hear the crackle of flames but, other than the dim glow of the lamp, the bookshop remained dark. “Vox will kill me if I antagonise Alastor any further. I can’t give you what you want!”

“That silly picturebox really is becoming quite a nuisance. Perhaps I should permanently dispose of him? Alastor wouldn’t have any distractions then and I could find another use for you, little lovebug...”

Valentino inhaled sharply. “No!” he yelled before wincing at his own desperation. “No,” he said again, softer this time, more resigned. “...What is it you want me to do?”

“Hm... You are quite correct. Alastor and Vox do have a habit of finding their way back to each other, even after the most heated of arguments. However, I happen to know that enough fear and trauma will turn the Radio Demon into the quietest of fawns, so perhaps you can work with that?”

The scent of smoke lingered in the air, keeping Valentino on edge. “What do you want me to do?” he asked again.

“Rape him.”

Valentino snapped his gaze up to the ceiling. “I’d rather you kill me,” he spat viciously.

Breathy laughter filled the bookshop. “Oh, you should have seen your face! How delicious your righteous fury is, sweet lovebug! Don’t worry, it was a mere joke. I have no interest in

watching him be violated again.” Her tone darkened into something a fraction more sinister. “For now, anyway. I must admit, the first time grew a little repetitive after the initial two hours. His begging became rather boring. Perhaps you wouldn’t draw things out quite so long?”

Valentino felt sick. “You’re a monster.”

“Careful, Valentino. If you play with fire, prepare to get *burned*.”

The armchair suddenly set alight and Valentino scrambled away from it, panic skyrocketing and quickening his pulse. He darted between the bookcases and tugged frantically at the locked door.

“Easy, little lovebug,” she cooed mockingly. “As I said, a mere jest. I have other plans for you.”

The fire ate through the bookshelves and Valentino trembled, banging desperately on the door, unaware that it had become soundproofed.

Not that anyone would have come to rescue him anyway.

“Are you listening, Valentino? I have great plans for you...”

The door slammed shut before Vox could grasp Alastor’s sleeve.

“Damn it, Alastor!” he snarled, banging his fist against the thick wood and hearing the telltale click of a lock.

He tipped his screen forwards, letting his forehead rest against the panelling as he splayed his fingers over the smooth wood of Alastor's door.

His chest ached.

"Al, *please*. Please talk to me. You've been avoiding me all week and I... I miss you. You're breaking my heart here."

He was met with silence and he sighed. "I know you're listening. I can feel your static just behind the door. It's prickly. You're stressed. You've been stressed all week."

More silence.

"Let me in," Vox murmured, trying to find the right harmony for Alastor's frequency, trying to soothe him without being able to see or touch him. "Whatever's upsetting you, I promise we can work it out. We can fix it if you'll just talk to me."

"...Go home, Vox."

Vox bit back a sigh at the muffled voice and closed his eyes, head pressed against the door. "It's killing me seeing you like this, Smiles. Why won't you let me in? Why won't you let me help you?"

There was a long pause. "I'm trying to protect you."

Vox frowned. "From what?"

Alastor refused to elaborate and Vox pressed his lips together. "If you don't open the door, I'll force my way in."

“I don’t want to see you.”

One moment, Vox was standing on Alastor’s doorstep, the next he was in Alastor’s hall, arms crossed. The lights dimmed before returning to full power.

“I almost believed you that time,” Vox said drily as Alastor glowered at him.

“I wasn’t lying,” Alastor growled before opening the door and gesturing for Vox to leave.

Vox cocked an eyebrow and walked towards the door before slamming it shut with one hand. Alastor bared his teeth before attempting to slide past Vox, but the Television Demon grabbed his wrist.

Alastor bristled and shoved angrily at him, but Vox’s own temper flared and he gripped Alastor’s other wrist and pinned him against the door.

“Stop,” Vox hissed as Alastor struggled against him, and the Radio Demon slumped against the door with a frustrated growl.

“Unhand me,” Alastor snapped

“Stop acting like a toddler,” Vox countered and Alastor stiffened before his static nipped at Vox’s skin.

“You have some nerve,” Alastor snarled. “I’ve killed demons for less impertinence.”

“Go on then,” Vox fired back. “Kill me.”

Alastor scowled at him, ears wilting. He lifted his chin in a last show of defiance and Vox exhaled before his gaze softened with concern.

“I’m worried about you,” Vox admitted gently and Alastor let his head fall against the door, staring up at the ceiling with a pained expression.

“Why won’t you let me help?” Vox asked quietly, cautiously releasing one of Alastor’s wrists in favour of trailing his fingers down his cheek instead. Alastor’s eyes slid shut and he instinctively leaned into Vox’s touch.

“You clearly want me to help,” Vox murmured as he traced Alastor’s jaw, desperate to touch the Radio Demon after a week of Alastor avoiding and rebuking him. “Why do you keep trying to push me away?”

Alastor remained silent and Vox brushed a thumb over his lower lip. He wasn’t sure if it stung more or less that Alastor didn’t push him away, so he pushed closer, boxed Alastor in against the door until their faces were mere inches apart and their chests were practically flush.

Alastor gazed up at him tiredly and Vox cupped his jaw and swept his thumb over the Radio Demon’s lip again in a tender caress. He squeezed the wrist he was still holding.

“I will *never* turn my back on you, Al,” he whispered. “No matter what you do, no matter what you’re facing, I promise I’ll be there for you. I’ll *fight* for you. I’ll always be on your side. We’re in this together, through thick and thin, yeah?”

Alastor’s smile was bitter. “That’s the problem.” His free hand drifted to Vox’s chest, fingers splaying over his heart.

“How is that a problem?” Vox asked, confusion evident in his pinched eyebrows.

Alastor's eyes slipped shut and he tipped his head against Vox's, letting it rest there for a few seconds. "Please leave," Alastor said gently.

Vox hesitated before tilting his head and letting his lips brush Alastor's in a barely-there kiss.

"I don't think you want me to," he breathed, lips grazing Alastor's with every syllable.

Alastor's eyes remained closed as his fingers slowly curled into Vox's sweater. Then, he shifted slightly and pressed his lips to Vox's in a featherlight kiss.

Vox stroked his cheek with a thumb, holding the bittersweet kiss for a few seconds before Alastor pulled back with a torn expression. Vox slid his hand around the back of Alastor's neck, letting it settle there protectively.

Silence stretched between them for a few minutes and neither of them seemed inclined to release one another.

When the quiet became too much for him, Vox swallowed and kissed Alastor a little firmer, a little more desperately, pleading for him to not run away again.

It was hardly how he had wanted his first kiss with Alastor to go, but at this point, he would do anything to convince the Radio Demon to stay and share whatever was *destroying* him.

He pulled back slightly to study Alastor and found the Radio Demon giving him a grief-stricken look.

Pain blossomed in his chest and he kissed Alastor again, his own distress obvious. He tangled his fingers in soft, red hair, massaging the base of an ear as he released Alastor's wrist in favour of winding his arm frantically around his waist. He trapped Alastor against the door, begging silently for him to open up, to let Vox *help*.

At first, Alastor remained stiff and unresponsive, but he slowly returned the desperate kisses, clutching at Vox's sweater and digging his fingers into his hip as though he couldn't bear the thought of Vox stepping away from him.

Vox nipped at Alastor's lip and kissed him hard before gently nudging their heads together and allowing bursts of anguished static to leap between them.

"I don't understand," Vox whimpered, finally allowing his own grief to inflect his filters. "You never shut me out. Why are you shutting me out?"

Alastor butted their heads together carefully and Vox clung to him, a wounded sound escaping his throat.

"Because I don't know what to do," Alastor whispered, filters heavy with interference. "I don't know how to fix this. I don't know how to keep you safe."

It was the most Alastor had confessed all week. Vox captured his lips roughly before shifting to mouth at his jaw.

"Vox," Alastor protested weakly and Vox pressed their heads together with another miserable burst of static.

"I don't know how else to keep you here," Vox said desperately. "I want to help but you won't let me. You keep running away from me and I... Al, it *hurts*. Please. *Please* let me in. Keep me safe from *what*? Fix *what*?"

Alastor remained quiet, eyes slipping shut, and a soft whine escaped Vox before he peppered sweet kisses over the Radio Demon's cheeks and jaw and forehead and nose, each one becoming increasingly despairing.

"Please stay," Vox begged in between kisses as he held Alastor tighter to him. "Please don't leave me again. I need you. I love you, Al."

Alastor's ears lowered and Vox's heart clenched painfully.

"We were happy," Vox breathed, voice faltering. "Two weeks ago you wouldn't have hesitated to tell me anything. What *changed*?" He squeezed Alastor's ear and the Radio Demon pressed closer, cautiously wedging his face into Vox's neck and inhaling his scent. Vox clutched at him, hooking the bottom of his boxy head over the top of Alastor's.

His vision grew a fraction glassy.

"Tell me how to fix us," Vox whimpered.

Alastor pressed a long, doting kiss to his neck. "You are perfect, my dear. You always have been."

And suddenly, he was gone.

Vox clutched at thin air and the loss of warmth had him gasping and his heart plummeting into his stomach. For a moment, he couldn't breathe, and he looked around desperately, searching for a flash of red. Agony struck his chest and he fisted his sweater as he staggered backwards, sucking in one breath after the next. Tears cascaded unexpectedly down his screen and he wiped at them viciously.

"Alastor," he croaked out to the empty house. The familiar static was absent and deep down, Vox knew that Alastor had truly left him.

"Alastor!" he called again, filters popping like broken speakers. His face glitched and he pressed a hand to his screen at the dull ache it caused.

He wrapped his arms around himself, electricity sparking over his frame with his mounting anguish.

He dropped to his knees, suddenly feeling cold and very, very alone.

Alastor slammed the door of the bookshop behind him, not bothering to listen for the click of the lock.

“Why?” he snarled furiously at the empty shop, and the lamp in the corner of the room flicked on. “Why did you tell him? What was the point?”

He bared his teeth even as his heart broke into hundreds of tiny fragments. His chest felt empty and numb and his lips still tingled from where Vox had kissed him. His picturebox had looked so *miserable* and he didn’t deserve it.

They were supposed to make each other happy.

“Answer me!” Alastor roared and his silhouette leapt onto the wall, looking angry and heartbroken.

“Temper, temper, little fawn,” purred that hushed voice.

“Why?” Alastor demanded. “Why did you tell that damned moth about me? Did you know that he would threaten me?”

“I’ve never been one to deny a curious mind,” she said, amusement in her tone. “He asked a question, I simply supplied the answer.

It didn’t make sense. “Why would he even *ask* something like-” He cut himself off as another thought came to him suddenly, and his stomach dropped. Perhaps he was looking at this all

wrong...

He lifted his gaze to the ceiling. "...Why did he come here? How did he know about you?"

"I hope you aren't accusing me of something sinister," she hummed.

He swallowed, glancing around the bookcases. Valentino *had* seemed hesitant to confront him at first...

"Did you... *force* him to say those things to me?" he asked, heart racing. The Voice was well-practiced at psychological torture. Had she threatened Valentino? Perhaps even tricked him into giving her his soul...?

"Now, why would I do a thing like that?"

Alastor's ears lowered. "Why would you reveal my past?" he countered.

She sighed, as though the conversation bored her. "How was I supposed to know that the sweet moth had a darker side to him? The man caught you dragging a body here one night and obviously decided he had questions. It isn't my fault how he chose to use the answers. He really is quite enamoured with that picturebox of yours." She chuckled lightly. "The lengths people will go to for *love*."

Alastor fell quiet as he contemplated her words, anger simmering low in his gut. "*Why* would you reveal my past to him?" he asked again, more firmly. Her answer still didn't quite add up.

"He asked me why you had taken such a dislike to him. I explained that it was his work that you took issue with, his *artform*. He asked me why and I merely told him the truth." She chuckled again. "If anything, you only have yourself to blame for being so harsh with him."

Alastor pressed his lips together and scowled. He was surprised to find himself *hoping* that Valentino had been forced to threaten him, and now disappointment settled in his chest to learn that the moth-demon had confronted him of his own volition.

He had wanted Valentino to be better than that.

“You would have preferred me to be the villain?” asked The Voice curiously. “Am I not better on your side, sweet fawn?”

He averted his gaze, staring at what appeared to be a scorch mark on the varnished wooden floor. “You’ve never been on my side,” he muttered.

“Now, now. Be reasonable. To be perfectly honest, you’ve been quite impudent these past weeks. I must admit, I’ve rather enjoyed seeing Valentino best you. Perhaps if you hadn’t been so arrogant during our last conversation, I might have held my tongue a little better...”

Alastor’s gaze snapped up to the ceiling, fists clenched. “You revealed my secrets because I wasn’t *obedient* enough for you?”

“Perhaps this will teach you a valuable lesson,” she said airily and suddenly, the chain around Alastor’s throat shimmered into existence and he was yanked onto his hands and knees. “I *own* you, Alastor. Never forget that.”

Alastor wrapped his fingers around the ethereal metal at his neck. “He has made it impossible for me to remain by Vox’s side!” he hissed. “If I continue on in this manner, I’ll irreparably *destroy* Vox!” The Television Demon had been so distraught, so desperate for him to stay. Alastor’s pulse raced at the memory of his frantic kisses, the way he had clung to Alastor with despairing whimpers. “The man already has abandonment issues, my evasions will *break* him.”

“You think too highly of yourself,” drawled The Voice. “Vox will move on, in time. You will be nothing but a distant, unpleasant memory.”

Alastor grit his teeth as the realisation took form. “You’re punishing me. You *wanted* Valentino to drive a wedge between us; that is why you were all too eager to explain my past.”

“Perhaps,” she hummed, amusement in her tone. “You were getting a little too bold for my liking. Valentino presented an interesting opportunity to... rid you of distractions.”

“You enjoy my misery,” growled Alastor.

“A satisfying snack,” she agreed. “As is that picturebox’s current feelings on the matter.”

Alastor’s heart ached. “He won’t give up on me,” he said coolly. “You underestimate his determination.”

“And you underestimate my power,” she said, the first hints of irritation creeping into her tone. “Let me make this simple for you. Continue to defy me, to address me with such audacity, and I will remove Vox from your life *permanently*. Follow my orders, submit to me fully, and perhaps I’ll consider removing Valentino and his threats instead. It’s your choice.”

Alastor smiled bitterly. “You have no power outside of this bookshop.”

His chain tightened and he was promptly hurled into a wall before being dragged across the floor until he gagged and choked. His silhouette rushed over to him, pulling at the chain in a futile effort.

“I have power over *you*,” she snarled. “Regardless of your location. That is more than enough.”

He was tossed against a bookcase like a ragdoll, his spine jarring against a shelf. He winced and sucked in a steadying breath as he pushed himself into a sitting position. His silhouette joined his side with a worried look. He smiled grimly at her annoyance. “You’re a fool if you think I’d let Vox come anywhere near this bookshop. You’ll never have him.”

Silence fell for a few long moments before Alastor was struck with the sensation of being pushed and pulled and dragged and thrown all at once.

There was a bone-crushing pressure and all the air was forced from his lungs as his muscles felt as though they were passing through a cheese grater. He gasped and howled at the same time, but no sound escaped his lips and he didn't remember curling into a ball, but that was how he found himself when he next opened his eyes.

White noise filled his ears as he looked around and was greeted by nothing but empty darkness. No bookshop, no light, no silhouette, just... a void. A space so dark that Alastor felt claustrophobic in a way that he had never experienced before. Was he even in Hell anymore?

"Where have you taken me?" he demanded and the words were dull and dead, like speaking inside a vacuum. He walked forwards a few steps and found himself abruptly disorientated, wondering if he was even walking at all, and in which direction. There was no obvious floor here, nor any walls or ceiling. What was he standing on?

The white noise made his ears flick agitatedly. "Where am I?" he said again, startled when his voice filters abruptly shut off, revealing his natural speaking voice.

The white noise grew louder.

He tried to back away from it, but whichever direction he took, the sound grew more deafening until he stilled.

He became aware of a foul smell that hadn't been present a few seconds previous, like decay and excrement and old blood. He stepped back instinctively, tail flashing as his ears drew upright and alert, trying to locate the danger. He stumbled over something solid and large that squelched and cracked underfoot.

He turned.

He drew in a sharp breath at the masses of rotting corpses before him, suspended in space at different heights, each one glowing dimly, some gently rotating, others twitching, all of them in various states of decay. Some bodies were strewn gracelessly over one another, others strayed alone, and there was an array of creatures stretching further than Alastor's eyes could comprehend; corpses with halos and wings, corpses with horns and tails, corpses that looked all too human, corpses that looked like nothing Alastor had ever seen before. The stench was nauseating.

He turned away from the unsettling sight, only to realise that he was surrounded by more rotting creatures, grey and cold and repulsive.

Sweat dampened Alastor's skin despite the cool air.

"The Forgotten," whispered a familiar voice, and Alastor shivered violently, sensing her presence close by.

It was unlike anything he had ever felt before - cruel and vile and dangerous and... and *evil*.

He glanced around the corpses, trying not to startle when they twitched and moved and *floated* unnaturally. A corpse behind him groaned wearily and he whirled around with wide eyes.

"These are the souls that failed to free me."

Her voice slithered down his throat and filled his chest with misery, gripping at his heart and drowning it in icy fear. He gasped, clutching at his chest, and panic raced through his veins, setting all of his nerves alight.

"Some of these are the souls you delivered to me."

Her voice slipped into his mind and bathed it in anguish and grief. Tears cascaded down his cheeks freely and he swiped at them, unable to stop them.

“Not one soul has managed to unchain me. Perhaps you would like to try?”

The corpses vanished and the fear and misery inside Alastor faded. He dried his eyes and took a steadying breath before squaring his jaw.

“Where am I?” he growled.

“Purgatory. My prison.”

“Why have you brought me here?”

“To give you a taste of your fate should I grow tired of your defiance.”

He bared his teeth viciously. “You’ll kill me? You’ll turn me into one of these poor, forgotten souls? Not very creative of you.”

She chuckled darkly and the sound was like tar dripping into his lungs. “Ignorant fawn. I didn’t kill these souls. Their fates were of their own will.”

He scowled. “Liar.”

Again, she chuckled. “They faced Purgatory’s trials and failed. They killed themselves, Alastor.”

Alastor shook his head in distrust and looked about the darkness. “Your games and lies bore me. Take me home.”

“These souls demanded the same thing - some politely, some less so. I promised them freedom if they could unbind me. All accepted. All failed the trials before they could reach me.”

Alastor scowled irritably. “Why put them through trials if you’re so desperate to have them break your chains?”

“The trials are not my doing. They were created by the beings that trapped me here so that I may never escape, so that no one may set me free. There are six, each trial based on the emotions I feast upon; pain, fear, lust, humiliation, despair, and fury. A cosmic joke at my expense, I assure you. Although, I do enjoy a hearty meal each time a soul faces the trials, so I at least get *something* out of so many losses.”

Alastor hummed in annoyance. “*Fascinating*. May I remind you that if you don’t send me back home, I won’t be able to bring you more souls?” He smiled tightly. “You’ll starve.”

He gasped as her rage crawled up his skin like an oil-fed fire, burning every inch of flesh and fur. “Stupid beast. Do you really think you’re the only soul I have under contract? I’ve been collecting meals for *millenia*. There will always be angels, demons, humans, and monsters willing to trade their souls for power. You are insignificant. Once I tire of you, I will devour you too.”

Alastor fell silent and her voice softened. “Let me show you what awaits if this attitude of yours continues.”

Alastor hissed as an invisible force carved something into the flesh of his arm, sharp and deep. He tugged his sleeve up, watching the word form in rough, bloody letters.

LUST

He frowned in confusion before a set of quick footfalls had his ears flicking. He turned but was suddenly dragged to the non-existent floor by the chain around his neck. He tried to

stand but to no avail and his heart quickened as he found himself immobile on his hands and knees.

It became apparent that there was more than one set of feet advancing on him, growing louder and louder as he struggled against his chain.

His breaths shallowed, tail flashing in anticipation.

“Let me go!” he snarled, tugging at his chain and craning his neck to see where the footsteps were coming from. There was nothing but darkness.

Suddenly, there were hands on him, groping, clawing, pulling at his hair, tearing him out of his clothes, and he threw his gaze around wildly, unable to see who the hands belonged to, unable to see the hands at all despite feeling them.

There was laughter in his ears, accompanied by a hundred voices and violent, filthy words that muddled into one deafening noise yet were still somehow crystal clear. His thighs were forced apart by invisible hands and his tail was pulled and eager claws raked down his flesh, drawing whimpers from his throat.

Alastor struggled but the chain held him down. He tried to scream but something cold and wet forced past his lips, choking him. Something long and slimy wrapped around his dick and something hard and *sharp* rammed inside his ass, and none of it felt remotely human, or demon, or angel, and still, the claws tore at his flesh and tongues slid over his face, and body parts that Alastor couldn't put names to pushed inside him or dragged over his skin, and everything was wet and sticky and *relentless* and-

He curled into himself and sobbed and he realised that the invisible creatures had gone.

“You can't progress to the next trial without beating the one you're facing,” said The Voice sweetly. “Each trial is tailored to the soul being tested. Perhaps you see why so many choose to... *forfeit*.”

Alastor trembled, unable to speak as he relived the memory of so many greedy hands and... whatever else had forced its way into him. He looked down at himself, at his ruined clothes and bloodied skin, at the strange fluids clinging to him, and the handprint-shaped bruises over his thighs and stomach and arms.

He suddenly vomited.

The Voice laughed.

“Test me again, ignorant fawn, and I will keep you here forever. I shall lure your precious picturebox here to see how he fares against these trials. Perhaps I shall be kind enough to let you watch his suffering.”

Alastor wept silently and when he next opened his eyes, it was to a quiet bookshop.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Rape at the end. The Voice being spectacularly shitty to both Valentino and Alastor. Mention of suicide in the last section. Gritty first and particularly third section, so be careful if easily triggered.

This chapter should have been a pretty big hint as to who The Voice is :) Anyway, I see a few broken hearts on the horizon, don't you?

UPDATE: Fanart from the lovely *Hantii*:

https://twitter.com/Pallas_of_Art/status/1805728473027142013

Chapter 21: A Performance Like No Other

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There hadn't been a radio broadcast from Alastor in two weeks.

Vox banged his fist on Alastor's door. "Alastor?" he called, chest aching. He hadn't seen the Radio Demon at all since their desperate kisses, since Alastor had *abandoned him*.

He was met with silence. He knocked again, more urgently. "Alastor, I've given you time and space. If you don't open this door, I'm coming in," he said, anger creeping into his tone. How could Alastor ignore him after everything they had been through? After twenty years of learning to love one another?

There were quiet footsteps and Vox focused his hearing on their approach and-

*Shit! What the shit?! Why did Alastor's static feel like **that?!***

"Alastor!" Vox gasped, pressing himself against the door. "What happened?" He pushed frantically on the door handle but it remained firmly locked.

His pulse raced and his breaths shook as he tried to send soothing bursts of static through the door, attuning his frequency to Alastor's-

His breath hitched. Much like his static, Alastor's natural frequency was all over the place, jumping from one extreme to the next, restless, panicked, *despairing*, and the hertz grated on Vox's systems like nails on a chalkboard.

The Radio Demon's static was harsh and defensive, stinging Vox's skin with every coarse crackle, and it was loud enough that Vox could hear it popping behind the door.

“Are you hurt?” Vox asked desperately, pressing himself flush against the door, uncaring what passers-by may have thought of him. “Alastor? Tell me what happened,” he begged, previous anger forgotten, to be replaced with distress.

Silence answered him.

Tears glazed Vox’s eyes and he let them fall. He had never felt Alastor so anguished, so utterly *broken*. “Alastor,” he whined. “Alastor, please open the door. Let me help.”

“Leave, Vox,” Alastor muttered and his voice sounded hollow.

Vox clenched his fists and focused on Alastor’s hall lights. He materialised beneath them and finally got a good look at the Radio Demon.

He inhaled sharply.

There were long gashes in his cheeks and Alastor looked *exhausted*. His gaze was empty and his smile appeared physically painful for him to keep in place. His features were sunken and his ears were low and his hair was dishevelled in a way that looked *wrong* on the usually pristine man.

He was pale and it was obvious he had lost weight. He gave Vox a tired look.

“Leave,” he said again and Vox couldn’t tear his horrified gaze away.

“Who did this?” Vox asked in a breathy whisper. “...What...?” He stepped towards Alastor, one hand outstretched, and Alastor bristled, ears standing to attention and teeth bared like a frightened animal.

Vox hesitated and dropped his arm. "Talk to me," he choked out.

"Get out," Alastor hissed and his eyes became dials, flickering wildly with his fear.

"I'm not leaving you like this," Vox said firmly. "Tell me how to help."

Interference grew thick in Alastor's voice. "I don't want your help. I don't want you here."

Vox took a risk and dared to approach him, palms raised in a placating manner. "You know I would never hurt you, Al."

Alastor's chest heaved and he pressed himself against the door like a feral animal, a growl in his throat. When Vox was a mere couple of feet away, his expression broke into one of unadulterated panic.

"Stop!" he snapped, eyes wide and Vox did, watching Alastor's wild gaze dart to his left.

Vox turned slowly and found Alastor's silhouette snarling at him, claws outstretched and mouth gaping, ready to attack.

Alastor swallowed and looked at Vox desperately. "You need to leave. I can't... I can't control it."

Vox blinked and glanced back at the enraged silhouette. "Hey, buddy. It's me. You know you're safe with me." He offered a hand to it and cried out when it clawed mercilessly at him, trying to rip his arm off.

"Stop!" Alastor snarled and Vox leapt backwards, clutching his bloodied limb as the silhouette snapped at him and flexed its claws.

Vox threw Alastor a confused glance and the Radio Demon narrowed his eyes.

“Get out,” Alastor said lowly. “You aren’t welcome here.”

Vox frowned. “Alast-”

“Get out of my house!” Alastor roared, and his filters suddenly failed, revealing his natural voice.

A sob escaped him and his knees buckled and he collapsed onto the floor.

Vox watched in alarm and quickly closed the distance between them, ignoring the silhouette’s silent snarling. He dropped to his knees beside Alastor and pulled him protectively to his chest, stroking an ear reassuringly.

Alastor rammed a fist into his screen and Vox jerked backwards, stunned as the Radio Demon stretched into a more demonic form and loomed over Vox with a hair-raising screech of fury. He grabbed Vox by the throat and tossed him into the nearest wall, and Vox barely had time to recover before Alastor’s shadows were on him, restraining his limbs as the silhouette prowled towards him with a menacing grin.

“Alastor!” Vox cried out, wincing as his limbs were pulled overly far. “It’s me! Please, stop! You’re safe! I promise you’re safe! I would *never* hurt you, Smiles!”

There was a flicker of recognition behind Alastor’s eyes at the pet name and he hesitated for a moment before shaking his head and shrinking to his normal size. He blinked and then his gaze widened as the silhouette readied itself to strike.

Alastor recalled his shadows, allowing Vox to leap out of the way of the silhouette’s pounce. It clawed at the wall in frustration and turned to Vox again.

“I can’t control it,” Alastor said again quietly. “You need to go, Vox.”

“And leave you alone with it?” Vox growled, realising that the silhouette had wounded Alastor. “Never. Is this why you’ve been hiding?”

“No,” Alastor whispered hollowly and Vox glanced at him worriedly and moved to place a comforting hand on his shoulder. Alastor swiftly caught his wrist with bared teeth before shaking his head and stepping backwards. The silhouette prowled around them restlessly.

Touch. Touch was the trigger, Vox realised. His hand fell limply to his side.

“You’re safe with me,” Vox said softly. “Whatever’s caused this, I can help. I can protect you, Al. Just... tell me what happened.” He glanced at the agitated silhouette. “Tell me why you’re at war with yourself.”

“You can’t,” Alastor muttered, turning away. “You can’t help.”

The Radio Demon wrapped his arms around himself, ears falling flat and Vox realised he had never seen him look so small and fragile. His chest throbbed painfully.

“Look at me, Smiles.”

Alastor sighed and turned slowly.

“You and me?” Vox said with an encouraging smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “We can do anything. We can overcome *anything*.”

Alastor stared dully at him.

Vox opened his arms in invitation. “Come here, my love. Let me take care of you.”

He waited. Alastor’s eyes slipped shut, shoulders slumping in defeat.

“I can’t love you, Vox. I can’t be whatever it is you want me to be.”

He sounded resigned. Vox smiled sadly at him, willing to let the lie slide whilst Alastor was so distressed. “Alright. Then let me love you. Let me take care of you the way you deserve. Let me make you some lunch and put on some tea and we’ll clean you up and-”

“I don’t want your love.”

Vox snapped his mouth shut at the anger in Alastor’s tone. He stared at the Radio Demon for a long moment. “...You almost sounded like you meant that.”

Alastor clenched his fists and his static nipped painfully at Vox’s skin. “I do.”

Vox straightened. This wasn’t like the other times Alastor had tried to push him away. This time, he didn’t sound like he was scraping together a lie. “...I don’t understand.”

Alastor laughed cruelly. “Then let me say it again. I don’t want your love, Vox. I don’t want your affection. I don’t want your filthy hands touching me. I don’t want *you* anywhere near me. I want you gone, Vox. I want you out of my life.”

Vox could almost hear the sound of his own heart shattering. “You don’t mean that.” Why was his voice so firm? Why was his tone absolute? Why did he sound like he absolutely *did* mean all of that?

“Poor pathetic Picturebox,” sneered Alastor. “Heart bigger than his brain. Always caring for those who don’t give a *damn* about him. Destined to be used and thrown away like trash.”

Vox reared backwards in surprise. “What the-”

“Get out of my sight,” Alastor interrupted dismissively. “You’ve outgrown your usefulness. You’ve become too attached. Too clingy. Too *desperate*.” He turned his back but Vox could see the tension in his shoulders - the only indicator that any of this act was a lie.

Vox lifted his head defiantly. “No. You don’t get to treat me like shit just because you’re hurting. You don’t get to push me away out of some delusional notion that you’re *protecting* me, or whatever other crap you’ve convinced yourself of.”

Alastor winced.

Vox smirked bitterly. *Gotcha*.

“Turn around and face me,” Vox growled. “Look me in the eye and tell me you don’t give a shit about me.”

Alastor threw him a withering glare. “I don’t give a shit about you.”

His filters were off. Vox’s smirk grew.

“You’re a damn liar.”

Alastor turned to him fully. “I don’t want you,” he snapped. “I don’t want *this*. I don’t want a simpering idiot chasing my tail because he has fooled himself into thinking that I can offer him something no one else wants to. There’s nothing for you here. *Move on*.”

“Bullshit,” Vox scoffed. “You’re scared and pushing me away.”

“You disgust me, Vox!” Alastor snarled and Vox had to admit *that* one stung.

“Sure I do. That’s why you kissed me two weeks ago. That’s why you clung to me. Why you called me *perfect*.” He shook his head in frustration. “What is going on with you? Why won’t you just tell me?”

Alastor hesitated, staring at him for a long moment. Then he ran a hand through his messy hair before his whole body sagged.

“I can’t do this,” he whispered.

Vox carefully opened his arms in invitation once more. “Can’t do what, Al?”

Alastor looked at him tiredly. “I tried. I wanted so dearly to give you what you craved, what you needed... but I can’t. I... I keep trying. I enjoy the dancing. I enjoy talking to you. But the touching? The embraces? The endearments? The kissing?” He shook his head defeatedly. “I... I feel *nauseous* just thinking about it.”

Vox fell quiet for a moment. He sounded sincere. “Okay, well, we don’t have to do any of those things-”

“I’m starting to feel uncomfortable around you,” Alastor said quietly. “I don’t like the way you look at me sometimes. I don’t like the way you make me feel.”

Vox’s eyes widened and his words died on his tongue. He finally managed to scrape a few together even though he felt as though he were drowning. “I... I can stop. I can take more care-”

“I think we need some time apart,” Alastor murmured. “I think you need to get over your crush on me and I need time to recover.”

Vox blinked. “My *crush*?” he echoed incredulously.

Alastor wouldn’t meet his gaze. “One day you’ll find someone who can give you what you want, what you deserve, and I... I’ll be nothing but a distant, trivial memory.”

“*Trivial*?” Vox repeated, anger blossoming. “You’re acting like I’m not completely and utterly in love with you. You think I can just ‘get over’ that with a few weeks of space and a couple of one-night stands?”

Alastor gave him a sour look. “I don’t care how you do it as long as you don’t involve me.”

Vox’s shoulders slumped. He had been so certain that Alastor loved him, that these past years had been proof of that. Could he have misread all those soft gazes? Those tender touches? Those sweet, adoring words? “You really don’t want to see me anymore?”

Was this really what had driven Alastor to so much distress? Was Vox truly the cause of Alastor’s emotional breakdown?

No. It couldn’t be. Something was... Something else *had* to be wrong. He couldn’t have misread so many clear signs.

Alastor frowned at him. “I think we crossed a line that we shouldn’t have. I think I convinced myself that I could give you something I couldn’t. I think you were desperate enough to believe me because you’re tired of being abandoned by the people meant to care about you.”

Vox swallowed. “So now you’re abandoning me? I like you a little too much and suddenly, you’re pushing me away?” The whole conversation felt *off*. Like a performance, a carefully written script.

Alastor’s gaze was hard. “Yes.”

“Twenty *years* of friendship down the drain, just like that?” Vox asked, voice cracking. What was happening here? What was Alastor doing? “You don’t trust me to stick to my word? You don’t trust me to keep my hands to myself, to not act on my feelings?”

Alastor squared his jaw. “Being around you makes my skin *crawl*.”

A void opened up in Vox’s chest. “You’re an asshole,” he said quietly, brokenly. What sort of sick script was this?

Alastor lifted his chin. “I think you should leave.”

Vox straightened, fists clenched. “Has this all been a damn *experiment* to you? Toy with my emotions and see if you can muster up anything in return, then *discard* me when you can’t? You won’t even let us return to being friends?”

Alastor’s ears flicked irritably. “I have no use for a *friend* who will always hope for more. I have no use for a companion who makes me uncomfortable. I’d like you to leave. I’d like you to *stay gone*.”

Vox grit his teeth even as heat prickled his eyes. “Screw you, prick.”

He stormed out of Alastor’s house and slammed the door behind him.

Once Vox’s initial anger and shock had subsided, it occurred to him a few days later that Alastor had cleverly changed tactics halfway through their argument to push him away.

He was an idiot.

Heart bigger than his brain indeed.

He knocked on Alastor's door and crossed his arms. "Pretty shitty of you to use my insecurities to get me out of your house," he drawled. "Effective, but shitty."

There was no answer.

"Are we really playing this game again?" Vox sighed. "Come on, Al. Open up. You've had four days to pull yourself together and think of an apology."

Silence.

Vox rolled his eyes and appeared in Alastor's home.

Alastor's very dark, very *empty* home.

Vox looked around the hall in alarm. Where was the table and lamp? The rotary dial phone? Had he been robbed? It wasn't exactly unusual in Hell... but surely no sinner in their right mind would risk robbing the Radio Demon?

Vox wandered slowly through Alastor's house and his stomach dropped as he was greeted by more empty rooms.

The last room was Alastor's bedroom. The bed was absent.

Vox swallowed, distraught charge bouncing between his antennae.

Alastor had moved, without so much as a phone call or note to say where.

It struck Vox that Alastor really had no intention of seeing him, that he had gone to such great lengths to ensure that Vox wouldn't bother him.

His world came crashing down around him very suddenly and he was left feeling hollow. What was happening here? What had he done wrong?

Vox stared numbly at the floor before turning towards the door. A forgotten picture frame caught his attention where it lay trapped behind the door. Vox picked it up.

It was a picture of him and Alastor from a couple of years ago. Vox remembered taking it at the side of the river after an impromptu bout of dancing. It had been a beautiful night and they were both a little buzzed from a nice bourbon. There had been strings of fairy lights in the surrounding trees after some sort of celebration that neither of them had bothered finding out about.

Vox licked his lips. Alastor looked damn beautiful in the picture. Happy too.

He held the frame to his chest, heart aching.

Alastor wouldn't return for it. He probably wouldn't even notice its absence if he could cut Vox out of his life so cleanly.

Vox slipped the frame under his coat and left Alastor's home for the final time.

It had been a while since Vox had visited Rosie and he longed for something familiar and stable in his shitshow of an afterlife, so three days after finding Alastor's house barren and drinking himself into a stupor, Vox decided to visit Cannibal Town, thankfully sober.

Weirdly, he quite liked the old-fashioned town. The people with their soulless gazes were actually very polite and they always had a friendly word for him whenever he passed through - well, nearly everyone. Susan had never managed to warm to him.

The *unique* food almost didn't bother him anymore, and the presentation of fingers and eyeballs in Rosie's Emporium could be considered... nearly aesthetically pleasing. At a squint, one could almost pretend they were artisan cakes and chocolates, decorated to look like body parts. Maybe.

Vox trotted into the Emporium and looked around curiously and when he didn't immediately spot Rosie, he wandered towards the back room. No one stopped him - the staff and customers were far too accustomed to him popping by for a visit.

He knocked respectfully and after a few moments, the door swung open part way to reveal Rosie in one of her prettiest summer outfits. The lady could wear a refuse bag and still look darling, honestly.

He plastered on a smile that probably didn't quite reach his eyes and Rosie's gaze lit up with delight, her smile widening, before the expression fell into something a fraction more nervous. She didn't open the door any further.

"Vox, darling, what brings you here?" she asked with a pleasant smile and *oh*, she was hiding something. She was definitely hiding something.

Vox's gaze drifted over her shoulder, attempting to peer into the room, but his efforts were thwarted when she shifted slightly and blocked his view.

His attention returned to her face. "I uh... I wanted to see you."

A frown pinched her eyebrows. "...Really?"

He reared back an inch at her disbelieving tone and suddenly, anger simmered in his gut. What was it with people not trusting him lately?

“Yeah. Really,” he said, perhaps a little harshly. “Friends like meeting up sometimes, but don’t worry, I can take a hint when I’m not welcome.”

He turned, but Rosie’s delicate hand shot to his shoulder, preventing him from leaving.

“I’m sorry, Vox. That was... That was rude of me. I just find it a tad too much of a coincidence that you showed up here when-” She cut herself off, looking torn.

He frowned. “When what?”

She hesitated and looked behind her. There was another pause before she sighed and opened the door a fraction wider, allowing Vox to glance past her.

At Alastor.

His back was turned to Vox and he didn’t so much as flick an ear towards the Television Demon in acknowledgement.

Vox’s shoulders slumped.

“Great minds think alike,” mumbled Vox.

“And fools seldom differ,” Rosie said pointedly, loudly enough for Alastor to hear and for his ears to lower like a displeased cat.

Vox shot her a pained look and Rosie's gaze softened with sympathy before she laid a gentle hand on his bicep and squeezed.

"I'll... I'll come back later," he muttered and Rosie pressed her lips together for a moment.

"You could stay? There's plenty of tea in the pot."

Vox's expression brightened. It seemed that Rosie was rooting for him, at least. "Perhaps--"

"Vox is a busy man with a television station to run. I'm sure he has more important things to tend to than a tea party," Alastor drawled, back still turned to Vox.

Vox stared at Alastor's upright ears. Usually they flicked and twitched and moved with his emotions, but now they were perfectly still. Unnaturally so.

"I'm allowed a break every now and then," Vox said quietly. "Time to catch up with *friends*."

"Oh? Do you have many of them?"

A strange combination of anger and heartache swirled around Vox's chest. Even Rosie looked startled by Alastor's derision. "What is your problem? Why are you being like this?" Vox asked.

"One week and you've already resorted to *stalking*," Alastor said airily, as though he was putting on some sort of *performance*. "It seems as though I really have dodged a proverbial bullet."

Vox clenched his fists. "Says the *serial killer*."

Alastor's static nipped at his skin, his frequency rolling into a range that grated uncomfortably against Vox's own. Vox's irritable mood grew before he managed to tear his gaze away from the frustrating Radio Demon and levelled Rosie with an apologetic look. He tipped his head in a polite bow.

"Forgive me, Rosie. There's no need for you to get dragged into one of our petty arguments." He narrowed a glare at the back of Alastor's head. "I'll call in advance next time, make sure you aren't already entertaining company."

"So he *does* possess a higher intelligence. How intriguing!"

Rosie scowled at Alastor before she leaned closer to Vox and patted the side of his boxy head. "He'll come around soon enough," she whispered. "He always does when it involves you, my dear." She gave him an encouraging smile and Vox tried to match it.

He could only hope that she was right.

"Maybe I can knock a little sense into that thick skull of his," she muttered beneath her breath and for the first time in a while, Vox's heart lifted.

He remembered the gift in his pocket and he revealed it to her. A smile blossomed over her dainty features.

"Chocolates? For me? Oh, Vox, you shouldn't have!"

"With mouse heart centres," Vox said softly as she took them from him. "I know how much you like them." He quirked his lips in a lopsided smile. "I really did come to visit *you*, sugarplum."

She giggled at the term of endearment, placing a delicate hand over her mouth. "Well, aren't you a charmer, Mr. Television Demon?" Her gaze slid to Alastor, her voice hardening. "You could learn a thing or two from him, Alastor."

Alastor's frequency grew even more jarring and Vox barely restrained a grimace. Still, he caught Rosie's hand and kissed her knuckles lightly before tossing her an impish wink.

She bit back another giggle.

"Talk to you later," Vox whispered and she nodded as he turned and sauntered out of the shop.

At least he still had one ray of sunshine in his miserable afterlife.

Chapter End Notes

Sassy Bitch Alastor enters the chat :3

Anyway, it's finally here, the split, the heartbreak, the downward spiral into their canon selves! Buckle up, it's going to be a bumpy ride...

Kudos to those who have made it this far - I love you all :)

Chapter 22: No Greater Defeat Than The Fight Itself

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Cutting Vox out of his afterlife was like swinging an axe into his own leg, once, every day, in the same place over and over and continuing to walk on the bloody limb until the axe finally cut all the way through or he bled to death - whichever was the slowest and most excruciating.

Alastor was not having a good time.

He hadn't been having a good time for a few months, ever since he had made the agonising decision to distance himself from Vox.

Rosie thought he was being hard-headed and cruel, but she didn't know about The Voice's threat. She didn't know what that evil creature would do to Vox if Alastor remained by his side. She didn't know what The Voice would do to Alastor if he continued to defy her. She didn't even know of Valentino's threat.

Alastor wouldn't allow Vox to face those trials, to have his soul *extinguished* by those trials.

That didn't make hurting Vox any easier. It didn't make pushing him away any simpler, watching his face crumple and his static pop in distress with every harsh glare, every stinging comment.

Worse still was that Vox - sweet, trusting Vox - kept returning to him after every biting remark, like a battered puppy determined to comfort *him*, hanging onto hope that Alastor still loved him (he did, more than anyone in this damned afterlife) and pleading with him to let him help.

And with every sneer and comment, Vox's shoulders slumped a little lower and his tone grew a little more defeated, but still he continued to crawl his way back to Alastor, hoping, begging for things to go back to the way they were. So, in his desperation, Alastor's words became

more cruel and vicious, and Vox would flinch away as though burned before he murmured gentle words of love and adoration and support, and Alastor had to flee before he gave in to his own heartache and pulled Vox against him with trembling hands.

Alastor began to school his features into a mask - his sutured smile hiding his true emotions - and he kept his ears upright and his back straight to stop Vox from reading him so easily. If he wanted Vox to believe his lies, he had to look nonchalant, dismissive, as though his heart wasn't being crushed into a thousand pieces.

Every week, Vox looked more exhausted, more *broken*, and shame ate at Alastor's chest until he was left feeling hollow and numb.

He missed Vox.

He missed Vox's loud laughter. He missed Vox's tender looks and his gentle hands. He missed the dancing and ear petting. He missed the teasing and subtle flirting.

The world felt... dark without him.

Dangerous.

It was strange, really. Alastor was trying to protect Vox from the things that lurked at the corners of the universe and yet without Vox beside him, he felt *unsafe*. He had grown so accustomed to Vox being *right there* that he hadn't ever considered what his afterlife would be like without his clever Picturebox.

Whoever had come up with the elegy *'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all'* clearly hadn't known what *love* was.

Alastor glared angrily at the bookshop, his latest unconscious quarry in hand. He lingered outside a moment longer and for a second, considered not entering, but a firm tug on his chain had him sighing and traipsing towards the door.

His current exhaustion had nothing to do with the fight the meagre sinner in his grip had put up before succumbing to Alastor's much greater power.

Alastor pushed the door open and the lights flickered on. He made it five steps before The Voice piped up, tone delighted.

"Two meals tonight, Alastor? How thoughtful!"

He frowned in confusion and glanced down at the unconscious sinner before a set of quiet footfalls caught his attention. He turned to the door and his heart leapt into his throat at the sight of Vox creeping after him, one foot already inside the bookshop.

White hot panic raced through Alastor's veins and he launched at Vox, sending him crashing onto the path outside. The door swung shut behind them and the lights switched off again.

Alastor tried to bounce to his feet, but Vox kept a firm hold of him.

"Have you lost your mind?" Alastor snarled, unwilling to admit to himself how much he was enjoying being sprawled across Vox like this after *months* of avoiding his touch.

"That's rich coming from you!" Vox snapped back, hands tightening around Alastor's arms. "I'm not the one who decided to switch personalities with a *rock!*"

Alastor struggled against him and quickly stilled when one of Vox's hands splayed over his lower back, possessive and desperate.

"I told you to stay out of this bookshop," Alastor growled frantically. "I told you *years* ago to never enter through that door and you *follow me inside?*"

There was grief in Vox's expression - grief and fury. "Why should I listen to you?" Vox hissed, voice cracking. "This is the first time you've shown any interest in me in *months*. What does it matter to you whether I go inside that bookshop or not? With the way you've been treating me, you wouldn't care if I was wiped from existence!"

Alastor's heart raced and bile crawled up his throat. That was the furthest thing from the truth.

He tried to peel himself off Vox again, but the Television Demon clung on and Alastor found himself digging his fingers around Vox's ribs, holding him down, keeping him away from the bookshop.

"You keep out of that shop," Alastor snarled, agitated static nipping at Vox's skin. "You don't *ever* follow me again, understand?"

"Fuck you," spat Vox and Alastor recoiled at the sharp profanity, at the anguish and rage in Vox's tone. "You don't get to promise me love and affection and suddenly toss me away when you get scared. You don't get to abandon me like everyone else." His gaze was glassy and Alastor's chest *hurt*. "We were happy," Vox continued angrily. "We were happy and you... Something happened to you. But you won't tell me *what*."

"Nothing happened," Alastor snapped, fingers pressing tighter into Vox skin, hard enough to leave bruises. Vox's claws dug into Alastor's back and arm, deep enough to sting. "I've simply grown bored of you. *Repulsed* by you."

"Liar," whispered Vox angrily and Alastor's breath hitched as Vox delivered a low flow of current through his body, just enough to ignite his fight or flight reflex. Their frequencies clashed and static bit at their skin, harsh and frustrated on both sides.

"Don't test me, Vox," Alastor growled, allowing his shadows to slide around Vox's neck and arms and legs, squeezing, restraining, and suddenly, Alastor wasn't sure whether he was trying to push Vox away or keep him close.

Vox's current ramped up a notch and Alastor trembled from the strain on his muscles. When he next opened his eyes, Vox's gaze was hypnotic, left eye swirling in a spiral.

“Tell me what happened to make you so scared,” Vox demanded.

The hypnosis combined with the stimulation of his nervous system had Alastor’s mind slipping into a trance. He tried to fight the sensation but found he couldn’t look away.

“The Voice... She’s going... to...” Alastor’s antlers elongated and he smashed them into Vox’s screen, breaking it.

Vox howled, electricity cutting off as he threw his hands over his shattered face and Alastor leapt to his feet and flung himself against the door, chest heaving, ears low, and eyes wide.

Vox scrambled away from him, blood collecting at the bottom of his casing.

“Asshole!” he yelled but there were tears in his distorted eyes as he scowled up at Alastor.

Alastor felt sick. He couldn’t find any words as he stared down at the bloodied, weeping Television Demon. After a moment, he pulled up his mask and put on a strained smile.

“You were trying to hypnotise me,” he said lowly. “Not a very nice thing to do to your *love*, Vox.”

Tears spilled down Vox’s cracked face. “I don’t want to lose you!” he sobbed, voice filled with grief. “But you won’t *talk* to me! I don’t... I don’t understand what I did wrong! I don’t understand what I did to make you not trust me! To make you so *cold*!”

Alastor swallowed carefully, resisting the urge to gather Vox into his arms and heal his face and beg for his forgiveness. “Well, trying to control my mind didn’t help,” he said with a blank smile.

Vox clenched his fists before more tears spilled over his face and he threw his hands over the specialised glass, ripping his skin in the process. He didn't seem to notice the fresh blood.

"I want you back," Vox cried, filters on the fritz and screen glitching. "I just want things to go back to how they were. I'll do anything. I'll be anything you want me to be. Just, please... come back to me. I can't... I can't keep fighting with you. It's *killing* me, Alastor!"

Alastor's resolve began to crumble the longer he stared at his broken love.

His heart hadn't hurt this much even when Harriet had left him. He hadn't felt this filthy even when those men had defiled him. He hadn't felt this nauseous even when he had been trapped in Purgatory with all those invisible hands.

His knees threatened to wobble. He was physically and emotionally exhausted. His chest throbbed with agony and his head was in a turmoil. He had never felt this much shame pooling in his gut.

He wanted to wrap his arms around Vox and never let go. He wanted to apologise and hold him close and promise that he loved him, over and over until Vox stopped crying, stopped *shaking*. He wanted to pepper Vox's face with kisses, to heal his wounds and hold his hands and tell him that there was nothing to change, that Vox was already perfect the way he was.

Instead, Alastor glanced briefly at the bookshop and icy dread seized his heart.

He turned a steely gaze upon Vox, mustering up the darkest, cruellest parts of himself, and he sharpened his smile.

"Oh, Vox... Sweet, *stupid* Vox. What exactly were you expecting? Surely you couldn't think our partnership would *last*? We made a deal, remember? I would help you achieve your dreams of becoming a successful media Overlord and, in return, you would grant me a favour. Well, I'm calling in that favour, Vox. I want you to leave me alone, and in doing so, our partnership has reached its end."

Vox scowled. “Don’t pretend this was all a transaction to you. I know what I saw. I know I meant more than that to you. I *mean* more than that to you.”

A laugh track crackled out of Alastor and he smiled unpleasantly at Vox. “You mean *nothing* to me, Vox. You were a mere pawn. A plaything for my entertainment. Now I’m simply bored of you. You’ve become useless. Soft. Filled with misguided feelings of affection. I’m afraid I shall have to throw you away and find someone new to play with. Someone more fun.”

Vox clambered to his feet, teeth gritted. “You can smile and laugh and say hurtful shit to me, and you can hide behind that stupid mask and try to keep your ears still and your shoulders relaxed...” A bitter smile spread slowly across Vox’s face. “But I can feel your static. I can feel how miserable and angry and upset you are. I can feel your frequency bouncing all over the place. It’s *grating*. You might as well have a flashing neon sign over your head saying ‘I’m having a breakdown’.”

Alastor stiffened, a soft growl leaving his throat and Vox fixed him with a hard glare. “What’s wrong? Am I hitting a nerve? Did you forget that I can read you like an open book, you righteous asshole?”

“You’re playing a very dangerous game, Vox.”

“No, *you’re* playing a dangerous game by bottling all this shit up!” Vox snapped. “You think you can scare me away that easily? Do you really think I’m going to abandon you over a few cruel words? I know what you’re doing, Al, and it won’t work. You might as well tell me what’s going on because I’m just going to keep coming back. Say what you like, use my insecurities, twist the knife deeper, I don’t give a shit! I won’t leave you like this. I won’t leave you when you’re so *afraid*.”

Alastor’s throat dried and he had trouble swallowing. What had he done to deserve this wonderful man and his unconditional love?

The lights in the bookshop flicked on and Alastor’s breath hitched. He had to get Vox away from this terrible place before The Voice lured him inside... before she *took* him.

If he told Vox about her threats, he would want to protect Alastor, he would want to confront her and Alastor couldn't allow that to happen. He couldn't let Vox become one of those grey, rotting corpses.

“How presumptuous!” Alastor chirped with a false smile. “I’m not *afraid*, Vox. Perish the thought! It appears you’ve mistaken my irritation for distress. I assure you, I am anything but *upset*.” His smile hitched higher, dangerous and intimidating. “You, however, are starting to wear on my patience. You assume too much. You’ve forgotten your place in our partnership and it has become clear that I ought to remind you.”

Scare him. That was all he had to do. Scare Vox away from him and this damn bookshop.

He allowed his body to shift and twist, taking to a more demonic form that towered over Vox with a gaping mouth and lethal claws, eyes unnatural and antlers huge and sharp. Static bit painfully at Vox's skin and he winced, grimacing more when Alastor's frequency clashed garishly with his.

Alastor curled his claws around Vox's neck and the Television Demon gasped, startled at the sudden proximity of Alastor's horrific face.

“Pester me again with your misguided *feelings* and I'll replace that head of yours with a rusted *microwave*.” He tossed Vox carelessly to the floor. “You don't know me as well as you think you do, dear.”

He turned his back on the Television Demon and headed towards the bookshop, but paused when he heard Vox clamber to his feet.

“The moment you leave, I'll walk into that bookshop and figure out what's making you do all this,” Vox said quietly.

Fear surged through Alastor's veins, gripping his heart and dragging it into a sea of panic. His pulse raced and his breaths shallowed and for a moment, all he could see was Vox in a void of darkness, trapped facing trials that would wear him down until he was despairing enough to join the thousands of corpses suspended in inky nothingness.

There was a cry of agony and Alastor realised too late that the cage was open and his silhouette was free.

He whirled around and watched in horror as the silhouette laid into Vox with a manic grin, claws tearing through flesh, fists smashing through specialised glass, teeth sinking into flailing limbs. When Vox tried to crawl away, the silhouette dragged him back mercilessly, inflicting as much pain as it possibly could.

“Stop!” Alastor snarled and the silhouette smiled wildly at him, seemingly pleased with itself as Vox scrambled away, shaking. He tried to push himself to his feet but the silhouette laughed silently and pounced upon him, drawing more blood and painting more bruises into Vox’s skin.

Alastor had wanted to scare Vox away, but not like this.

“I said *stop*, ” Alastor hissed as he prowled towards the silhouette and its smile grew devilish as it suddenly grabbed Vox by the throat and dragged him towards the nearest wall before smashing his face into it over and over until his screen was completely shattered and he slumped to the floor, blind.

Alastor froze for a second, stunned, before racing over to Vox and shrinking to his normal form. The silhouette stepped back, manic expression fading into a hard frown.

Alastor slid between Vox and the silhouette, heart thumping and stomach rolling with nausea.

“Vox,” he murmured as he touched the Television Demon’s shoulder and tried to roll him over so he could check the damage.

A hand shot towards Alastor’s chest and a barrage of electricity was pumped through his body, sending him toppling backwards. He sat up and watched Vox shuffle away from him, shattered screen dark as he propped his back against the wall, blue flashes of charge skittering over his battered, bloodied frame.

Silence fell between them.

Vox's chest heaved. "Y-You w-w-w-were ssssssupposed *tch*-to be diff-ferrrrrr-ent."

His voice was laden with interference and audio errors, and Alastor realised that his cameras and visual inputs weren't the only components that had been damaged by the silhouette's attack.

He swallowed thickly and shook his head, then realised that Vox couldn't see him. "Vox, I-"

"Y-y-y-you w-were ssssssupposed to-to-to-to **czzzz** care."

"I do," Alastor whispered before he could stop himself. "I do care, Vox."

A pause.

"But-but-but **tzzzz** you ddddon't."

"I do," insisted Alastor as he licked his lips and raked his gaze over Vox's beaten body. He couldn't do this anymore. He couldn't keep hurting Vox like this. He couldn't keep pushing him away. He had to tell the truth. "I'm terrified of her taking you away from me. I'm terrified of what she'll do to you if I stay with you."

"Wwwwhy are y-y-you **tchzzz** doinggggg this *tch*-to me?" There was a note of anguish hidden beneath all the static and errors, and Alastor's heart fell into his stomach. Heat prickled his eyes.

"I never meant for this to happen," he said desperately. "I was trying to scare you away, but I never meant to *break* you. I'm sorry, Vox."

“W-w-what did- *tz* I doooooo wrong?” His shoulders were shaking and it was obvious he would be sobbing had his screen been functioning.

“Nothing,” Alastor said gently as he started towards Vox. “You did nothing wrong, my dear. You are perfect. You are beautiful and determined and so very clever.” He swallowed and came to a halt beside Vox. “And I love you. I love you more than you could ever imagine. And I’m afraid of losing you to her, so I tried to push you away because you hating me for the rest of eternity and being *free* is better than you being trapped with her and wanting to end your own existence.”

Alastor inhaled a shuddering breath, shame filling his stomach as he watched blood soak into Vox’s clothes. “But I’m a weak, selfish man, and I can’t keep this up. I can’t keep hurting you. I want you. I need you. I... I feel *safe* when I’m with you.”

Vox remained quiet, chest still heaving, fists clenching, and Alastor glanced around the empty street before deciding to take a leap of faith. Vox deserved as much.

“I was raped,” Alastor whispered. “It’s why I killed those men, why I don’t like people touching me, why I can be so hostile with other men... and *she* knows that. But then you came along - the exception to the rule. She tried to use you against me at first, tried to convince me that you would be like the men that... that held me down. But then I fell in love with you and her lies had no effect, so now she wants to take you away. She feeds off misery and shame and anger and she hates the effect you have on me. She thought Valentino would be able to separate us but when that didn’t work, she outright threatened to torture both of us - to make me watch you participate in her twisted *trials*.”

He fixed Vox with a miserable look. “That’s why I need you to stay away from the bookshop. I need to keep you *safe*.”

There were a few seconds of tense silence and anxiety threatened to drown Alastor as he waited for Vox’s reaction to his biggest secrets.

“*Tz*- Say ssssomething,” Vox growled angrily.

Alastor frowned in confusion. "...What more could you want me to-"

"Sayyy **Tchhh** some-th-thing, asshole! A-a-answer me!"

Alastor stared at him before the epiphany struck. Vox was blind *and* deaf.

The silhouette had inflicted a great deal of damage and Alastor clenched his jaw before reaching out a hand to heal the man he loved.

The chain around his throat faded into existence and yanked Alastor onto his stomach. He grunted in surprise and pushed himself off the floor, then flinched when a cool hand was placed on his shoulder.

He turned to his silhouette with a snarl and found the feral creature wearing a solemn expression, one finger outstretched towards the bookshop. Alastor shifted his gaze and watched the lights in the bookshop flicker and flash wildly.

A warning.

Alastor bared his teeth at the bookshop and turned back to Vox. He began chanting a familiar verse as he reached for the Television Demon, only for his silhouette to shove him onto his back with a scowl.

"You've caused enough damage!" Alastor snarled. "Look at him! Look what you've done to him! You've broken him, so it's my job to fix him."

The silhouette's shoulders slumped and for a moment, it looked at Vox with guilt in its expression. Then, it placed a gentle hand against Alastor's chest and pointed at the bookshop once again.

An uncomfortable heat crawled over Alastor's skin. "I'm not leaving him like this."

The silhouette's frown deepened.

Alastor choked as he was yanked onto his stomach once more by his chain.

"If that **czz** sil-hooo-lette is part of-of-of-of yyyyour emotions, you-you-you musszzzt truly hate m-me."

Alastor's eyes widened. "No. Never. I love you. I love you, Vox." He reached for Vox's hand.

He was dragged backwards by the chain and he coughed and tugged at the ethereal metal around his throat. The silhouette watched on with a pained expression.

Alastor glanced at it frantically. "Why? Why would you do this to him? He's going to think I've abandoned him! He's going to think everything I've said these last months is true! He's going to think I've beaten him to a bloody pulp and left him in the middle of the street!"

The silhouette stared at him.

That was the point.

Alastor swallowed as the realisation came to him. This was the way to keep Vox safe. This was the way to ensure The Voice lost interest in Vox - by having him hate Alastor.

Alastor shifted his gaze to Vox's abused body. "I... I can't leave him like this," he choked out.

The silhouette looked away, ashamed, and Alastor's breath hitched. A tear rolled down his cheek as he realised *this was it*, this was the last time Vox would try to convince him to *stay*.

"I don't want to leave him," Alastor whimpered as he glanced at his silhouette, grief-stricken. "I... I was supposed to..." He licked his lips and pushed himself onto his knees, grunting when he was pulled down again by the chain, chin smacking against the ground. Tears dripped onto the tarmac. "I was supposed to take care of him. I was supposed to stay by his side. He made me happy."

Alastor squeezed his eyes shut against the tears. "I don't want to do this without him. I don't want him to despise me!"

A cool hand rubbed at his back and he wept.

"A-a-are you sssstill there? Ala- zzzsss- tor?"

Alastor managed to lift his head off the ground. "Yes," he whispered uselessly. "I'm still here, darling."

Vox slammed a fist against the ground before his shoulders began to shake in violent despair. "W-w-why am I-I-I-I not *tch* good enough **tzzzzz** to mmmmake you st-st-stay?"

"You are," whimpered Alastor and he instinctively tried to find a frequency that would harmonise with Vox's, but the other demon was too distraught and his frequency refused to settle. It occurred to Alastor that Vox hadn't registered the presence of his static and Alastor wondered just how much system damage Vox was struggling against.

He attempted to crawl towards Vox again, but the chain stopped him. He lowered his head in defeat and a cool hand squeezed his shoulder.

He looked up at his silhouette. "Is this really the only way to protect him?" he asked brokenly.

The silhouette glanced worriedly at the bookshop and Alastor sighed. "...So be it."

"You rrrreally abandoned m-m-m-me **czzz** like thisszzz?" Vox shouted into the street, startling Alastor.

The Radio Demon shook his head. "I'm still here, my love," he whispered because it made him feel a little better, even if Vox couldn't hear him. "I tried to heal you. She won't let me."

Vox pushed himself against the wall and used it as a prop to climb to his feet.

His antennae sparked fitfully. "Fuck you, Ala- sszzz -tor," he snarled before he dissolved into pure electricity and zipped into the nearest street lamp.

Alastor closed his eyes and the chain vanished around his throat. He dragged himself to his feet, head heavy, and set off towards the bookshop, his silhouette rubbing his back for a few seconds before becoming dormant at his feet.

Chapter End Notes

What a fun chapter! What a loving, tender chapter! I'm sure Alastor will be completely well-adjusted after this! And Vox is definitely not going to spiral into an obsessive, controlling, glitchy mess! Weird how we haven't seen Valentino in a while, huh? I'm sure he won't get sucked into all this mess :)

UPDATE: There is now art by the lovely *AislinCeivun*! It is absolutely mesmerising, so go check it out!

Bluesky: <https://bsky.app/profile/ais4horn.bsky.social/post/3lfflmuspxs24>

Tumblr: <https://www.tumblr.com/aislinceivun/755658657568522240/todays-fic-love-sonnet-goes-to-another-a?source=share>

UPDATE 2: There is also art by the lovely *Via* over on X/twitter, so go shower them with love: <https://x.com/v1aexo/status/2000224404651835608/photo/1>

Chapter 23: Second Chances And New Beginnings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was a round of rapid knocking followed by a rattle on the door handle.

Valentino glanced over the back of his couch, tightening his grip on the almost-empty bottle of red wine. He grabbed his newest pistol from the side-table and approached the door slowly, keeping it on the chain as he opened it.

An unfortunate-looking demon stared back at him. She seemed to be half composed of rock and Valentino briefly wondered how she had perished.

She thrust a note at him and he eyed it warily.

“She told me to give you this,” said the rock-demon in a gravelly voice.

Valentino raised an eyebrow.

“The... The *thing* in the bookshop.” She looked haunted and her gaze darted up and down the street in the same way the goat-sinner had when he had delivered the other note.

Valentino pressed his lips together. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He slammed the door and stalked towards his couch, only to clench his fists when he heard the note being stuffed into the squeaky mailbox mounted on his outside wall.

He waited a few seconds before venturing outside to collect the note.

He locked the door behind him and opened the envelope.

Go to Vox. He needs help. He can't fix himself alone. Alastor has blinded and deafened him.

Defy me and I will do the same to you.

Valentino swallowed as he read the address written below the message, heart leaping into his throat. Vox hated him... Why would the creature in the bookshop think it a good idea for him to show up at Vox's house uninvited whilst he was wounded?

His eyes slipped shut defeatedly. He had better do as she asked before she followed through with her threat.

Hopefully, Vox wouldn't immediately murder him.

Vox's hands shook as he plucked broken glass from his face.

Once he was finished with the tiny fragments, he carefully felt for the screws at the back of his head and undid them. He reached awkwardly into his casing and hissed as he caught the hot cathode ray tube.

He drew his hands backwards, searching for the electron gun circuit, and he brushed his fingers over the burnt-out components. He reached for the fine-nosed pliers by his side and set a finger against one of the burnt components, heating up the solder just enough to melt it. After a little fumbling, he carefully removed the broken resistor.

He reached into his small kit of replacement components, then suddenly realised he couldn't see the bands on the replacement resistors, meaning he wouldn't know whether he was

inserting the correct resistance.

“Fuck!” he snarled, punching the floor in frustration before a choked sob fell from his throat and he let his non-functioning face flop into his hands.

Alastor usually helped him with major repairs.

Now he would have to learn to do them alone.

He took a steadying breath, the vents at his ribs sucking in large amounts of cool air before expelling a burst of warm air. He picked up a resistor and decided he would have to follow a method of trial and error.

It was shaping up to be a long night.

A couple of hours later, once he had replaced all the broken components and fitted a new specialised glass screen that he had created - using a regular television screen would make it impossible to manifest a mouth to eat and drink and he needed those things to stay functioning, thanks to the biological parts of his mess of a body - he decided to test the new circuitry out.

Ten minutes later, he woke up sprawled on his front, smoking and sparking and still very much blind, but now with a raging headache.

He touched the circuitry at the back of his head with ginger fingers and cursed at the melted components - more than there had been when he had first started.

He choked back a whimper and smashed his fist against the carpeted floor. How was he supposed to replace components when he couldn't even *see* what he was picking up?

A hand curled over his shoulder and for one blissful moment, Vox managed to convince himself that Alastor had returned to help patch him up.

The fingers were far too long.

Vox kicked out, sweeping the intruder's legs out from under them, and he pounced on the other demon, wondering how he hadn't heard them breaking in.

"Whoooo a-are you?" Vox snarled, and his voice was tinny and muffled and still laden with errors, likely because of his melted circuitry.

No answer.

He growled and wrapped his claws around what he assumed was a neck. "A-A-Answer me orrr I'll **czzz** cremate *tch* you."

A finger tapped the side of his head. He smacked it away and rammed his fist into a gut.

Not even a grunt.

Vox's antennae sparked angrily. "TZZ- Speak, da-da-damn it! Who arrrrrrre you-you-you? What do- *dz* -do you w-w-want?" What was it with everyone holding their silence around him today? First Alastor, now this asshole...

The finger tapped his screen and Vox wished he could manifest his teeth so he could bite it off. Instead, he gripped the wrist, sitting more heavily on the intruder's... crotch? Damn, this guy was tall. He was having to stretch a fair amount to grip the guy's throat.

And he was most definitely sitting on a *man*.

“Do-do-don’t make meeee ask- *tch* again, *zzzsss*- shithead!” Vox snarled, squeezing the guy’s throat harder.

He frowned when a gentle hand guided his palm to seal over the intruder’s lips.

He could feel the guy’s mouth moving - hot air hitting his palm and a jaw working against his fingers despite there being no sound.

Vox scowled in confusion. “...Can-can-can’t you *zzss*- speak?” he asked irritably.

His hand was brought to something soft and fluffy and long. It travelled down the full length of the object before coming to rest on something smooth and warm, then travelled lower to what might have been fur or the ruff of a coat or-

Valentino.

Vox straightened before he clenched his fists. “What *arrrrrre* you do-do-doing here, ass- *zzz* - clown?” He didn’t slacken his grip on the moth-demon’s throat.

No response.

If Vox had hair, he would have pulled it out. Instead, his antennae sparked and fritzed and a frustrated sob tore out of his throat.

“Would *tzz*- someone tell-tell-t-tell me w-what the *fuck*- *czz* is goingggg on?” he snarled, body beginning to tremble as the stress and agony of the day caught up to him.

Why would no one talk to him? Why did he keep getting abandoned? Why did everyone keep attacking him? Why had Alastor left him bleeding and vulnerable and blind in the middle of the street? How had Valentino found his address?

Why did Alastor hate him? What had he done wrong? What had he done to deserve Alastor's cruelty? Why would Alastor beat and abandon him like they were... like they were *enemies*?

Gentle arms wound around him, pulling him down into a warm chest pillowed with soft fur.

Vox sobbed, clutching at Valentino's coat, body wracked with violent jerks and trembles as his afterlife crumbled around him. Valentino rubbed slowly at his back and Vox shook his head furiously and pinned one set of arms either side of the moth-demon.

"Ttzzz- Talk *tch* to meee, damn y-y-you!"

One of Valentino's lower hands touched Vox's melted circuitry as the other tapped the side of his casing and when Vox's antennae buzzed with frustration, Valentino dragged one of Vox's hands to his throat.

There were fluttering vibrations under Vox's palm and a bobbing Adam's apple and Vox stiffened.

Valentino *was* talking.

Vox couldn't hear him.

...That was why his own voice sounded so muffled and tinny - his brain was processing it as an output, but he couldn't actually *hear* his own voice.

Now that he was concentrating, the only things he could 'hear' was the buzzing and whirring of his own electronics, and the eerie noises of his own blood pumping through his body - because those were all internal sounds that didn't rely on external audio input for him to process. His brain told him that his body made those sounds, so consequently, he 'heard' them - like how he could hear his own blood rushing between his ears when he was human.

Wait... Did that mean...?

Did that mean that Alastor might *not* have abandoned him? Had Alastor been talking to him all along and he just couldn't hear it?

He swallowed, mind racing. Alastor's silhouette had still beaten him bloody, which meant that a part of Alastor had meant to hurt him. And even if he had tried to communicate with Vox, the Radio Demon hadn't touched him once after Vox had shocked him. Did that mean he *had* left? If he had heard Vox's pleas for answers, why hadn't he tried to reassure Vox? Why hadn't he touched him or held him or... or done *something* to prove that he was still there? That he was listening?

He clenched his fists. Why would Alastor want to *break* him in the first place? What had Vox done to deserve such viciousness? He had been nothing but loyal and supportive and patient with the Radio Demon, and this was how Alastor repaid him?

Deaf or not, it didn't change the fact that Alastor had treated him like *shit* for the past few months. And if the Radio Demon was being honest about getting bored of Vox, about being repulsed by Vox's emotions, then that meant Alastor had led him on purposefully - merely for entertainment value.

All the touching and dancing and sweet looks and tender words... all lies. A twisted game created by Alastor out of idle curiosity. Was the Radio Demon really capable of such a horrific torture? Had he really spent twenty years building hope in Vox so he could brutally rip it from him and destroy it when he was at his most vulnerable? Was Alastor really that heartless?

Vox's chest throbbed painfully.

Had Alastor ever even considered him a friend? Or was that all part of the manipulation?

Vox tore away from Valentino with a glitchy growl of fury. “What-w-what arrre you do-do-doing he-here, VVVal?”

He fell quiet when Valentino placed a gentle hand against his chest, over his heart.

“I-I-I don’t-t-t neeeed your *tch* help.”

Except he did. He was blind and deaf and *broken* and Alastor wasn’t going to fix him this time. He had already proven that he couldn’t repair himself without blowing himself across the room, so who else could he trust when he was so vulnerable?

He probably shouldn’t trust Valentino after not seeing the guy for so many months - after beating the crap out of him and threatening him the last time they met. After firing him. Still, if Valentino wanted to kill him, he’d had plenty of opportunities to do so. Instead, he had revealed himself to Vox, barely defending himself when Vox wrapped his claws around his throat.

Valentino took his hand, squeezing his palm carefully. Vox sighed and slipped his hand out of the moth-demon’s grip.

“Whyyyy would you-y-you helllllp me af-af-after **czzzz** ever-yyy-thing?”

Valentino grabbed Vox’s hand again and turned his palm over. He began drawing a word over Vox’s skin with a finger.

Guilt.

Vox would have frowned if his face had been functional. “Guilt ooo-verrrr what?”

There was a pause before a resistor was pressed into Vox’s open palm.

Vox toyed with the resistor for a moment, wondering whether he should push the moth-demon into answering him. He eventually decided against it - at least until his audio inputs were repaired. And his vocoder; the vocal errors were starting to grate on his nerves.

His shoulders slumped.

“Pass *sszzz* me the-the-the one wi-with a blue-blue-blue baaaand followed by *tch* aaaa red, black- **czz** , then y-y-y-yellow.”

Vox replaced the casing on the back of his head, hands falling to his sides when Valentino wordlessly slid the screwdriver from his grip and tightened the screws.

Valentino settled onto his knees and Vox stared at the floor for a long moment before slowly turning and sitting opposite him, knees drawn to his chest.

“Thank you,” he mumbled, calibrating his cameras and audio inputs so that there was no lag between the two - it was frustrating when other people’s words didn’t line up with their mouth movements.

“You’re welcome,” Valentino said softly and Vox made another adjustment.

“Why did you come here?” Vox asked again.

Valentino’s antennae drooped forwards, shoulders lowering, making him much smaller than he actually was. “I already told you. I care about you. I couldn’t leave you hurt after all the times you helped me.”

The corners of Vox's mouth turned downwards. "Last time I saw you, I was less than pleasant to you."

Valentino shrugged. "Understandable. You were trying to protect Alastor."

Vox flinched at the name before anger settled in his gut and he clenched his fists for a moment before relaxing them. "Did you really start the fight with him? Did you really attack him, threaten to reveal his secrets out of jealousy over me?"

Valentino stared at him, looking confused for a moment before his eyes brightened with realisation. "Oh, er, I..."

Vox's gaze hardened. "How did you learn his secrets in the first place?"

"...I have contacts," Valentino said, but his gaze wouldn't quite meet Vox's and Vox could tell that he was trying to scrape a lie together.

"Valentino," Vox growled, "I'm tired of being lied to. Tell me the truth or get out."

Valentino's eyes widened and for a moment, he looked panicked. "I... I didn't... I never..."

Another thought occurred to Vox and he scowled at the moth-demon. "How did you know I was *hurt*?"

Valentino stiffened. He opened his mouth and closed it again before his whole body sagged. "...I saw your fight."

Vox narrowed his eyes and Valentino held up a hand. "It was an accident! I was on my way to see a client in the area and I... I, er... caught you two fighting." He pressed his mouth into a thin line. "Alastor didn't hold back, did he?"

Vox averted his gaze for a moment, chest aching. “Did he... Did he really abandon me in the street? Did he really just... walk away?” Vox asked quietly, voice barely a whisper.

Valentino hesitated before reaching for Vox then aborting the movement. “...I’m sorry, Vox. I know you loved him.”

Not a direct answer, but still an answer. Vox wrapped his arms around himself and a tear rolled down his screen. For a moment, he had hoped that Alastor had stayed, that Vox merely couldn’t hear or see him... but having it confirmed that Alastor hadn’t tried to comfort him at all, that he had left Vox broken on the street for anyone to stumble across and take advantage of...

“Shit,” he whimpered, breath hitching. Alastor really didn’t care about him.

Vox’s heart crumbled to dust and the pain in his chest made it difficult to swallow. He felt as though he had been stabbed and he drew a hand over his shattered heart and sucked in a few sharp breaths before his fans flicked on in an effort to cool him down.

“Vox?” Valentino asked worriedly and Vox grit his teeth before letting his head fall into his hands as a few silent sobs left his throat.

“How could he do that to me?” Vox hissed. “How could he just... throw me away after twenty years? After *everything* we’ve been through? I... I thought...” His shoulders jerked and his body trembled and his voice made a strange, synthesised wail before he muted it. His antennae sparked and his screen glitched and a headache blossomed.

Two arms slid around him and carefully drew him to a warm, solid chest and Vox unmuted his sobs as he clutched at Valentino. Valentino rubbed his back gently and pulled him into his lap and Vox clung to him like a lifeline as his whole world crashed down around him.

No more dancing, no more silly games of tag, no more chatting into the early hours of the morning, no more shared dinners, no more teasing one another over radio broadcasts and

television shows, no more private jokes, no more tender smiles...

No more Alastor.

Valentino was quiet as Vox cried against him and eventually, Vox managed to pull himself together enough to feel a sliver of guilt about the damp patch on Valentino's coat.

"Sorry," Vox muttered as he pulled away from Valentino and the moth-demon frowned and continued to rub his back.

"You don't need to be, Amorcito."

The endearment was a drop of familiarity in a sea of unpredictability and Vox found himself leaning into Valentino's large hands.

Valentino, who, despite Vox's threats last time, had taken the risk of showing up at Vox's house to help him when he was at his most vulnerable. Valentino, who still clearly cared about him despite them not having spoken for *months*. Valentino, who treated him so gently after Vox had fired him. Valentino, who was tending to Vox's broken heart despite his own rejected feelings for the Television Demon.

Valentino was such a sweet man... It would have been so much easier if Vox had fallen for him instead of someone so cruel and unfeeling as Alastor.

He closed his eyes and let his head flop into his hands. What a mess.

He heaved a sigh and straightened, turning to Valentino with a tired look. "Can we start again?" he asked quietly, defeatedly.

Perhaps he had been a little harsh with Valentino? The man had made a mistake because he had unrequited feelings for Vox. He got into a fight with Alastor after he had let his feelings

get the better of him, but Vox shouldn't have ended their friendship over one mistake. That made him no better than how Alastor had treated *him*...

Maybe Vox shouldn't have been so quick to side with Alastor all those months ago. Alastor had wounded him then, too.

Vox's antennae sparked angrily. He should have seen the signs sooner. He had been blinded by his own feelings for the Radio Demon and he'd let Alastor hurt him time and time again. He'd let Alastor batter Valentino and he had turned a blind eye to his unreasonable hatred of the moth-demon, all because he had *hoped* that Alastor wanted him in the same way he longed for the Radio Demon.

He wouldn't be so naive again.

He wouldn't fall for Alastor's honeyed words and empty promises again. He would never take part in Alastor's twisted games again.

"What do you mean?" Valentino asked.

Vox mustered up a smile he didn't particularly feel. "I'd like to offer you your job back."

Chapter End Notes

Before people ask, I promise endgame is Radiostatic, but for all you Staticmoth shippers... enjoy the next little section of the story :)

Don't forget, they're on the way to their canon selves...

Chapter 24: The Miserable, The Lonely, And Depressed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A frown pulled at Valentino's features as he watched Vox massage the top of his own screen before starting on the next piece of paperwork.

His shift had ended over two hours ago.

So had Valentino's, but he had returned to the studio when he realised that Vox had forgotten about their plan to meet at a local bar after work.

Vox's antennae sparked and he winced before rubbing idly at his casing.

This was pitiful.

Vox had changed so much these past few months that Valentino barely recognised him. The light-hearted, playful, *hopeful* man Valentino had first met was long gone; replaced by the overworked, exhausted, lonely Overlord before him.

Valentino stifled a sigh and stepped further into Vox's office.

"Go home, Voxy," Valentino said softly and Vox startled and blinked up at him for a moment, unseeing, before his glazed expression became a little more focused.

"Shit," he groaned, letting his head fall into his hands. "I forgot again."

"It's okay, amorcito," Valentino said with a half-hearted smile. "It was just a drink."

“This is the second time I’ve forgotten in as many weeks,” Vox sighed into his hands before he fixed Valentino with an apologetic look.

“You... have a lot on your mind,” Valentino said quietly, a sliver of guilt nestling into his chest. “I understand.”

Vox’s shoulders sagged a fraction before his expression hardened and he stood. “No, I need to do better. I need to put the past behind me and focus on the present.” He offered Valentino a sincere smile. “I need to give my attention to my *friends*, not those who betrayed and abandoned me.”

Valentino managed a smile that he didn’t really feel. “You *need* to take better care of yourself,” he said gently, closing the distance between them and glancing at the stack of paperwork in distaste. “Go home, Vox. Rest.”

Vox grimaced before shaking his head. “I promised you a drink.”

“We can go to the bar any time,” Valentino said, waving a hand dismissively. “Take it easy tonight. Go home and relax.”

Vox frowned at his paperwork for a moment before rubbing at his arm. “I, uh... I don’t wanna... um...” He pulled a face and sighed. “Yeah, okay. Sure. You’re probably right...” He shuffled away from his desk but Valentino caught his arm, intrigued.

“You don’t want to... what?”

Vox startled then ducked his head sheepishly. “It’s stupid. Look, I’ll see you tomorrow. Have a good-”

“What’s stupid?” Valentino asked, interest piqued.

Vox licked his lips before averting his gaze. “I just... It’s so... *quiet* when I get home.”

Valentino tilted his head. “You don’t like the quiet?”

“I don’t like being alone with my thoughts,” Vox admitted and Valentino straightened, taken off-guard by the honest answer. That would explain the overworking.

His antennae drooped and Vox tracked the movement before a frown pinched his digital face. He pointed at Valentino’s burned antenna.

“How did that happen, anyway? And why hasn’t it healed?” He peered at Valentino’s wings, which had been whole for months now.

Valentino swallowed, lost in dark memories of the bookshop.

‘A reminder of what awaits you if you break your promise.’

He touched the damaged antennae, throat dry, and he shook his head stiffly at Vox. “I don’t know,” he lied. “I got into a fight and it never healed.”

Vox hummed curiously before shrugging a shoulder. “Weird.” He grinned. “So, which bar do you want to hit?”

Valentino hummed thoughtfully. “Well, I was thinking about The Roadhouse on-” He cut himself off with a frown and narrowed his eyes at the innocently smiling Vox. “Wait a second. Didn’t I just tell you to go home?”

Vox pouted. “Come on, Val! Humour me. I’m stressed and miserable and you’re the only thing that can cheer me up. Well, you and a bottle of top shelf brandy.”

Valentino crossed his arms irritably. “Fantástico. Good to know I’m as useful to you as a bottle of liquor.”

Wincing, Vox gave Valentino an apologetic look. “That came out wrong. You know I enjoy your company.”

Valentino wasn’t certain that he did. Vox seemed to enjoy his company when they first met, sure, but after everything that happened with Alastor, Valentino was starting to feel like a consolation prize. His own guilt on the matter certainly complicated things.

Vox noticed his hesitation and his shoulders sagged a fraction. He sighed. “Look, Val. I know I’ve been a pretty shit friend, but I *do* enjoy your company. I’m just... not very good at showing it.”

Because he was hurting. Because since the big fallout with Alastor, Vox had walled his heart off and thrown himself into work, refusing to take care of himself. Refusing to face his broken heart.

The Television Demon looked *exhausted*.

Valentino hesitated before giving in. It was becoming somewhat of a recurring problem; him caving to Vox’s whims and wishes. He might not have moved on from his ‘crush’ on the Television Demon as quickly as Vox believed...

“An hour or two at the bar and then you are getting some rest, amorcito,” Valentino said sternly, earning himself a bright grin.

Vox grabbed his wrist and hauled him out of the office.

“He’s pretty cute. You should ask for his number.”

Valentino sipped at his wine and eyed the gorgeous spider-demon chatting with his pink-haired friend in one of the booths. Suddenly, the spider demon revealed a small plastic bag filled with white powder and he emptied some onto the bar before removing the straw from his drink. His friend laughed and snatched the straw from him once he was finished with it.

Valentino grimaced and turned away from the pair. “I’m not exactly looking for a hookup right now.”

Vox pulled a face at the pair before nursing his brandy. “Right. Not into crackheads. Got it.”

Valentino watched Vox from the corner of his eye. Even weary and broken-hearted, Vox was handsome. Charismatic. Valentino wanted to be close to him even if Vox didn’t feel any attraction to him. If friendship was all he would get from Vox, then Valentino would force himself to be satisfied with that.

They chatted for a while but Vox was too distant for any meaningful conversation. He didn’t drink enough brandy to lose his senses, but he looked a little glazed after a while and Valentino heaved an internal sigh and set his own half-finished wine glass down.

“I’m going to head off, Vox. You should too,” Valentino muttered as he tipped the bartender and rose from his stool.

Vox side-eyed him, a brief flash of guilt passing over his face. “Okay. Have a nice night.”

“You too,” Valentino sighed before he turned away from the melancholy Television Demon.

And knocked straight into an ugly boar-like demon.

The boar-demon grinned at Valentino and he shivered. The man was tall - not quite as tall as Valentino but certainly a couple of feet taller than Vox. His shoulders spanned wider than Valentino's and he had two elongated lower canines that protruded from his mouth like short tusks. He had a porcine nose sculpted onto a more human-like head, but his hair and beard were composed of short, coarse hog hair. A pair of pig-like ears extended from his head like handlebars and he wore black leather.

"Hola, bichito," he drawled and Valentino stiffened.

He would know that voice anywhere. "...Carlos?" he whispered and the hog-demon smirked and tipped his head.

"Fancy meeting you down here, Val."

Valentino stepped back and was stopped by his stool. "You sold me out. Used me as a scapegoat." He clenched his fists. "I died in prison because of *you*."

"I mourned you," Carlos said, waving a hand dismissively. "You were always my favourite. My prettiest cariño." He glanced over Valentino hungrily. "Some things never change."

Valentino grit his teeth even as his heart ached. The years he had wasted trying to impress this pig of a man... He had been blinded by his charm and empty promises. Now they were both dead, he could see Carlos for what he really was, for what he had *always* been.

"Some things do change," growled Valentino as he sidestepped the hog-demon. "I won't fall for your lies ever again. Hope you have a shit afterlife, puerco."

He made it one step before Carlos gripped his wrist in a meaty palm and slammed him against the bar before sliding in front of him, trapping him with an easy smile.

"Now, now, bombón. Is that any way to speak to the love of your life?" he teased, pressing his bulky weight against Valentino until the bar top juttred painfully into the moth-demon's

spine and he was forced to arch backwards to relieve the pressure. “We had a lot of fun together back in the day, sí?”

“You used me,” Valentino hissed. “Treated me like shit to impress your friends. Lured me into your shady business deals. All the drugs and prostitutes...” He shoved at Carlos’ chest with a snarl. “You made me perform for your clients! They paid you for it! I was a toy to you. A doll you dressed up and sent out to take care of your pretty chicas, and when I wasn’t *pimping* for you, I was a drug mule, or a... a fucking *pornstar* for your VIP clients!”

He shoved at Carlos again to no avail. “I loved you,” Valentino hissed, voice hitching. “And you took advantage of me. I meant *nothing* to you.”

“Don’t be like that!” Carlos said with a chuckle. “I was upset when the cops took you away. No one else could suppress their gag reflex like you, my precious little cock warmer.”

Valentino raised a hand to strike the disgusting demon across the face, but Carlos suddenly wrapped a thick hand around his throat and Valentino choked, eyes blowing wide.

There was the sound of glass shattering and Carlos screamed and released Valentino. He staggered backwards, clutching his arm and Valentino noticed the broken wine glass stem protruding from his bloody bicep.

Vox slid next to Valentino, leaning casually against the bar with his arms crossed as he eyed the larger boar-demon in disdain.

“Touch him again and I ram the next glass down your throat.”

Carlos bared his teeth and snorted like an enraged pig. He yanked the broken glass out of his arm and wielded it at the bored-looking Vox. “You’re going to regret that, you stupid twink!”

“I’m shaking with fear,” Vox deadpanned, arms still crossed.

“Vox,” Valentino warned worriedly and Vox spared him a brief glance before Carlos charged towards him, makeshift weapon heading for Vox’s screen.

Vox gripped his wrist and sent a couple thousand volts through him and the man dropped like a stone, gently smoking.

Vox stared down at him, unimpressed. “Idiot.”

He downed the rest of his brandy and slipped an arm around Valentino’s waist before striding over the fried demon. “Come on. I’ll escort you home. There might be other dumbasses on the loose.”

Vox led him towards the exit and it occurred to Valentino that the bar had fallen quiet, all eyes on the pair of them - some wary, some intrigued, some with lecherous smirks.

A thrill raced up Valentino’s spine as Vox’s arm tightened around his waist, antennae sparking in warning to the few patrons who looked excited at the prospect of starting a bar fight.

As they reached the door, a ram-like demon stood and puffed his chest out at Vox, and Vox gripped his shoulder firmly and forced him back into his seat with a roll of his eyes. He steered Valentino outside and as the doors swung shut, there was a muffled sound of glass breaking and an enthusiastic battlecry. A few seconds later, the bar erupted into a cacophony of grunting and yelling and heavy thuds, and a beer mug crashed through the window.

Vox shook his head in distaste and guided Valentino down the street, arm still casually draped around his waist.

Valentino’s heart fluttered wildly in his chest and he flexed his fingers, unsure where to put his hands.

“Carlos is an asshole,” Vox commented after a few moments. “How’d you fall for a guy like that?”

Valentino swallowed and it took a moment for him to drag his thoughts away from Vox’s warm arm and the secure feeling that had settled in his gut.

“He was handsome and charming,” he managed eventually. “I met him at a club. He showed me a good time. We had fun for a few months. I fell for him hard and fast and once he was sure he had his hooks in me, he started revealing his true colours. I was... too blind to see it.”

Vox side-eyed him with a frown before his gaze drifted to his feet. He was quiet for a long moment. “I guess we’re both a little foolish when it comes to love, huh?”

Valentino’s antennae drooped and he studied Vox. The guilt in his chest pooled a fraction more and he tentatively placed a hand between Vox’s shoulders, rubbing at the tension that had suddenly collected there. “Thank you for defending me, amorcito.”

Vox’s fingers curled around Valentino’s hip. “Any time, Val,” he murmured and the rest of the journey passed in a strange sort of silence.

They reached Valentino’s beautiful garden and Vox admired a few flowers before smiling weakly up at Valentino as he unlocked his front door.

Valentino observed him for a moment, shoulders slumping. Vox looked so *tired* these days. Empty. *Lost*. He wished there was something he could do to bring the spark back to those sad digital eyes.

Since he couldn’t, he simply offered the Television Demon a sincere smile and scraped up some courage. “If loving you makes me a fool, then at least I’m a happy fool.”

Vox’s eyes widened. “...Val, I-”

Valentino huffed a laugh and held a hand up to stop him. "I know. I'm not asking you to return my feelings - I already know you don't." His gaze softened with fondness. "I just... wanted you to know that I really do care about you and I'm not going to leave you any time soon. Even when you forget our nights out and try to set me up with crackheads," he added, teasing.

Vox stared at him for a long moment. "...Promise?" he whispered and Valentino's heart broke for him.

He approached the Television Demon slowly, smile warm and genuine. "I promise, Vox. I promise I won't run away or abandon you. I'm here to stay until you ask me to leave."

Vox swallowed and curled his fingers around Valentino's sleeve. "I won't ask you to leave," he said quickly. "Please stay."

Valentino's smile dimmed but he carefully kept his arms by his sides, knowing he had no right to touch Vox after his confession. They were both so very damaged. "I'm here, amorcito. I always will be."

Vox blinked and Valentino swore he caught a glimpse of a tear collecting in one of his eyes.

And suddenly, Vox's lips were on his.

Valentino inhaled sharply as Vox dragged him closer and clung to him as though his life depended upon it. He lapped desperately into Valentino's mouth and whined softly when the moth-demon didn't immediately respond.

Dazed, Valentino slid his arms around Vox and Vox made a sound of approval before nipping at Valentino's lips and tasting his tongue.

He became rather insistent about it and Valentino frowned when the Television Demon cupped his cheek and gripped his hip and began grinding against him.

Valentino made a sound of discomfort but Vox ignored him and the moth-demon yelped when Vox abruptly shoved him up against his front door and began humping his thigh frantically.

The epiphany struck him.

He pushed Vox away roughly and put a hand against the other Overlord's chest when Vox approached him for a second round, Valentino's ruby venom dribbling from his mouth. He stared at Valentino hungrily, like an addict waiting for their next dose, and Valentino felt nauseous as he caught sight of Vox's tented trousers.

He couldn't even kiss someone without manipulating them.

Vox didn't deserve this.

"Shit," Valentino whispered under his breath before he pushed Vox away. "Go home, Vox. Sober up. You're not thinking clearly."

He opened the door.

Vox shook his head, gaze clearing. He glanced down at his crotch and frowned before his eyes rounded and he snapped his head up to stare at Valentino again.

"I'm sorry!" he blurted, almost desperately. "Please don't leave. I... I'll do better. I'll *be* better. I... I can be anything you want me to be, go as slow or fast as you like. Just don't... don't abandon me."

Valentino froze and turned to fully face the Television Demon. He tilted his head, confused. “I’m not... Vox, this is *my* fault. You didn’t ask for me to drug you. You only did that because of my venom. I’m the problem, not you.”

Vox swallowed and wiped the venom from his screen. Charge bounced between his antennae fitfully. “You didn’t *make* me kiss you.”

That was a good point. Valentino fell silent.

Vox raised his hands pleadingly. “Please don’t run away. My heart can’t handle it a second time.”

“You’re not thinking straight,” Valentino whispered as his chest tightened. “You’re drunk and lonely and you... you’re feeling *vulnerable*-”

“I’m not drunk, but I *am* feeling fucking vulnerable!” Vox said desperately. “I *am* lonely! And miserable and heartbroken and *betrayed*! Because the man I loved for twenty *years* beat me half to death and left me blind and deaf in the middle of a dark street, where anyone could have come across me and finished the job.”

There were tears now, trickling thinly down his screen. His voice cracked and glitched as he spoke. “But *you* were there to put me back together - even after I threatened you and cut contact with you. You came back to help me, not knowing whether I’d turn on you. And since then, you’ve done nothing but take care of me and comfort me and you say the sweetest shit to me even though I’ve treated you like crap and I-”

Vox grit his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. “Why couldn’t I have fallen for you instead? Why did it have to be him? Why did I have to get invested in that psychopathic *asshole* when I could have had you instead?”

Valentino stared at Vox, bewildered and Vox met his gaze before throwing his hands up in frustration. “Why can’t I just love you?” he bit out.

Valentino's heart ached and he rubbed a hand over his chest. That... that actually *hurt*. Because why *couldn't* Vox love him? Why did it have to be so complicated? What had Alastor done to deserve this wonderful man's heart, even after breaking it?

"I want to," Vox breathed. "I want to love you. I need you." He clenched his fists angrily. "But I... I *don't* love you."

Pain lanced Valentino's chest at his sincerity. He considered the words for a long moment, considered the agony in Vox's eyes, the vulnerability in his tone.

"Two out of three isn't bad," Valentino said quietly and he offered his hand to Vox.

Vox looked anguished. "You deserve better than that."

Valentino considered those words too. "I really don't."

Vox stared numbly at his outstretched hand.

"I can make you feel good," Valentino murmured. "I can make you forget about him. At least for a little while."

Vox hesitated. Then, he took Valentino's hand, turned it over and brushed his lips gently across his knuckles.

"No," Vox said firmly and Valentino's shoulders sagged. He tried to slip out of the Television Demon's hold, but Vox tightened his grip. "I want to do this properly," Vox continued. "You deserve more than what I can give you, but the least I can do is *try*. Tomorrow night, seven o'clock. Dinner is on me."

A tiny glimmer of hope sparked in Valentino's chest as Vox fixed him with a slightly dimmed, but familiar charming grin.

“Maybe I can learn to love you?” Vox whispered.

Valentino squeezed his hand affectionately. “I’ll take whatever you can give me.”

Vox smiled sadly and kissed his knuckles again before straightening and stepping away, hands clasped behind his back.

“Have a good night, Val. See you tomorrow.”

He whirled on his heel and walked away and Valentino watched him go with a feeling of shame flooding his gut. He shut the door quietly behind him and looked up to his ceiling with a scowl.

“I never wanted this,” he whispered after a few moments.

He was met with silence, but he had a feeling that someone, somewhere, was laughing.

Chapter End Notes

Poor unfortunate souls, in pain, in need~

Anyway, I've been listening to too much Meatloaf and it gave me more ideas for sad Vox. I'm not a StaticMoth shipper but I'm actually quite enjoying writing this (probably because I know the endgame ;))

Chapter 25: Catching Butterflies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

One month turned into two, which turned into three, and Vox and Valentino fell into a comfortable rhythm. Vox made a conscious effort to leave work at a reasonable hour (he wasn't always successful) and Valentino would gently coax him out of the office if it got too late.

They attended reputable restaurants (the kind that didn't try to poison their customers - one could never be too wary in Hell), and they lingered in bars, and sometimes they found themselves in each other's homes.

As time passed, Valentino's smile grew a little brighter, a little wider, and he gazed at Vox with deepening affection and warmth the longer they spent together. He wore his love for Vox on his sleeve and it wasn't long before the whispers switched from Vox-and-Alastor to Vox-and-Valentino.

There were rumours about why Vox and Alastor were no longer seen strolling through Hell's streets together, lost in animated conversation or exchanging playful insults over their radio and television shows. Some rumours blamed Valentino for wedging himself into their relationship, some blamed Vox for cheating on Alastor, some said they were never together in the first place and Alastor was a psychopathic murderer who likely abused Vox until he had the strength to escape.

Some rumours were... closer to the mark than Vox would have liked.

Still, Valentino was sweet and caring and he looked at Vox as though the Television Demon had hung the moon and stars for him. So, Vox said all the right words, smiled in all the right places, took him on romantic dates and treated him the way he deserved to be treated.

And he felt... nothing.

His actions were mechanical, his words were scripted, his smiles were as false as his supposed love for the moth-demon.

He enjoyed Valentino's company - he really did. He enjoyed their friendship. They had a lot in common and they always took care of each other.

...But Valentino produced squeaks instead of static and he had no frequency for Vox to match. His antennae vibrated and drooped, but they didn't swivel and flick towards the softest of noises and he had no hair for Vox to thread his fingers through.

Valentino couldn't melt into the shadows and stay just out of reach when Vox chased him around Pentagram City, and he couldn't foxtrot or Charleston or play piano. He couldn't tease Vox about modern technology and he didn't have a wicked sense of humour, nor could he keep up with Vox's wit.

It felt like Vox had lost a piece of himself. He was constantly searching for that comforting frequency and he felt *alone* without Alastor's static tickling his skin.

Valentino offered touch far more freely than Alastor and Vox was certainly grateful considering his history, but... it wasn't as satisfying. Valentino slipping his hand into Vox's wasn't the same feeling as Vox hooking his little finger around Alastor's, brushing his fingertips against Alastor's palm until the Radio Demon slowly, tentatively, uncurled his fingers and allowed Vox to slide their palms together, fingers interlacing loosely until Alastor eventually tightened his grip, as though Vox was his lifeline, as though he never wanted to let go...

With Alastor, every touch had to be *earned*.

And Vox had craved the reward.

Valentino was generous and he gave Vox the touch he needed, but Alastor made him work for it and in turn, Vox felt *worthy* of love. Touching Alastor was a *privilege*.

Vox's nails bit into his palms painfully. Alastor's gentle, shy, reverent touch had turned into something agonising and cruel and disgusted, and Vox had faced abuse at the hands of his parents before, but Alastor's betrayal hurt ten times worse than anything they had inflicted upon him. Alastor's rejection had left him feeling numb and empty; a shell of a man, void of self-esteem and the brightness that had once infected his smile. His world had grown cold and grey.

“Voxy?”

Vox lifted his gaze to the concerned moth-demon opposite him.

His feelings weren't fair to Valentino, but there was nothing he could do about them.

He forced a well-practised smile. “I'm fine,” he dismissed with a flamboyant wave of his hand. “Just thinking about a potential scheduling conflict next week. I can sort it out tomorrow.” The lies rolled easily off his tongue - far easier than they ever had with Alastor.

Valentino's eyebrows pinched together slowly. “Oh.” Valentino knew he was lying. Vox suppressed a grimace.

Still, Valentino smiled warmly at him and leaned forwards, propping himself against Vox's desk. “You should take a break. You've been working for eight hours straight. Did you even grab lunch?”

Vox tried to remember what he had eaten for lunch and when he couldn't, decided that no, he obviously hadn't taken a lunch break.

“Let me finish this paperwork and-”

Valentino plucked the pen from Vox's grip.

Vox scowled and reached for it, but Valentino dangled it just out of his grasp.

“Give it back,” Vox said, holding his hand out and trying not to let irritation infect his words.

Valentino threw the pen across the room and grabbed Vox’s hands. Vox’s mouth drew into a thin line as he eyed the half-finished paperwork. “I need to sign that before tomorrow.”

“You can take a ten minute break,” Valentino said, squeezing Vox’s hands and rubbing his thumbs sensually over Vox’s knuckles. “Chat to me. Take your mind off work for a few minutes.”

Vox pressed his lips into a thin line. “Val, I really need to finish-”

The rest of his sentence was cut off by Valentino tugging him forwards and slotting their closed mouths together in a sweet, innocent kiss.

They parted and Vox fell silent, frowning at his desk.

He felt nothing when he kissed Valentino. No affection. No butterflies in his chest. No excitement. He might as well have kissed a brick wall.

He slowly slid his hands from Valentino’s gentle grasp and clasped them over his lap.

What was wrong with him?

Why couldn’t he feel anything anymore? Even when he had bed hopped, he had felt *something*. Now there was... nothing. No excitement, no lust, no warmth...

“Voxy?” Valentino asked quietly, gaze concerned. “Did I do something wrong?”

Vox raised his gaze. Valentino looked upset. Guilty, even. He leaned away from Vox, antennae drooping sadly towards his back.

Valentino deserved better than this.

Shame filled Vox's gut and he plastered on a bright smile. "Not at all. I've just realised how overworked I am." He swept the paperwork to one side, making a mental note to return to it once Valentino had been reassured. "Come here. Let me kiss you again. I've missed you, y'know?"

The lies flowed off his tongue readily.

Valentino perked up and leaned across the desk again, pressing their lips together in another closed-mouth kiss. He did that a lot - carefully kept his tongue out of Vox's mouth so Vox wouldn't accidentally be exposed to his venom. It was considerate of him to go to such lengths to stop himself from manipulating Vox; to stop himself from controlling Vox's feelings for him. He was a good man.

Vox didn't want good.

Vox wanted to *feel* something.

Something beyond pain and grief and betrayal

He lapped inside Valentino's mouth and the moth-demon made a soft sound of protest at first before finally acquiescing. Vox slid their tongues together, letting Valentino's honey-like venom sink into his bloodstream, and finally, *finally*, he began to feel something hot and interested stirring in his gut.

He cupped Valentino's cheek and sucked on his tongue like it was the best drug he had ever tasted and Valentino let him for a few moments before he gently pushed Vox away, frowning.

"Vox," Valentino said weakly, toying with his own hands. His antennae were still low and the corners of his mouth tugged downwards unhappily. He looked uncomfortable. "I don't think this is a good idea. I don't... I feel as though..." He grimaced then frowned harshly at Vox. "I'm tired of people using me. I... I don't want you to treat me like that. I don't want to be treated like a *thing* that gets you off."

He looked very small in that moment and a pit of guilt opened up in Vox's stomach despite the arousal beginning to tent his trousers. He pressed his thighs together and dropped his gaze.

"...Sorry, Val," he murmured. "You're right. I shouldn't... I shouldn't treat you like..." He propped his elbows on the desk and let his head fall into his hands. "Shit."

Why did he ruin every good relationship he had? *This* was why everyone hated him, why no one cared about him, why everyone *left him*. He always screwed everything up because he pushed too hard and too fast and he was *selfish*.

Valentino's gaze softened and he tilted Vox's screen up with a finger. "I know you don't love me. I don't expect you to," he whispered with a small smile. "I'll take what I can get, but I want it to be *honest*. I want it to be *you*. Not a result of my saliva. I want you to kiss me because you enjoy it. I want you to like being around me."

Vox blinked, taken off-guard by the sincerity, and Valentino smoothed a hand down the side of his casing. "I will never force you into anything, amorcito. If you want to stop all this and remain as friends, all you have to do is tell me. I would do anything for you if it means I get to keep you in my life."

Vox leaned into his palm and Valentino's expression warmed. "You are so beautiful, Vox." He cupped Vox's head between two hands. "And the kindest man I've ever met. You're the best thing that has ever happened to me and I just want you to be happy."

Vox's eyes slipped shut as he let the adoring words wash over him, sinking into his bones like a soothing balm. Valentino was truly generous and kind-hearted; Vox was lucky to have his affection - to have someone who was so open about loving him, about wanting him...

All those years of thinking he was broken and unloveable, destined to be abandoned by everyone he cared about, *betrayed* by people he was supposed to trust... and here was Valentino, returning to his side despite Vox's threats all those months ago, soothing the hurt away, taking care of him, loving him *unconditionally*.

Something fluttered in Vox's chest.

His eyes flew open and he straightened.

Valentino tilted his head curiously. "Voxy?"

Vox stared at Valentino for a long moment. "...Kiss me," he said quietly.

Valentino made a face and his hands fell away from Vox's head. "I don't-"

Vox caught both of Valentino's hands before they could disappear off the edge of the desk. He squeezed them affectionately. "Kiss me because I want you to," he whispered. "Kiss me because *you* want to."

Valentino blinked and Vox offered him a lop-sided smile. "Come here, Val."

Valentino licked his lips, glancing down uncertainly at Vox's crotch. "I think you've had a bigger dose of my saliva than I first thought. I should have pulled away quicker."

Vox shook his head in amusement. "Nothing to do with it, sweetheart. I've just realised how good things are for me right now." He offered Valentino a genuine smile this time and Valentino's eyes widened before his expression brightened.

“Oh?”

“Maybe I’m going about this the wrong way,” said Vox before he pushed away from his desk before rounding it and perching on Valentino’s lap. He caught Valentino’s chin between his fingers and the moth-demon gasped softly. “I think it’s time I started showing you how much you mean to me, Val.”

Valentino’s eyebrows pinched together momentarily before Vox leaned in to pepper kisses over his neck and jaw. He nuzzled into the fluffy ruff at his neck and lifted a hand to caress Valentino’s cheek and soon, Valentino was clutching at Vox, holding him tight and making various happy squeaks and clicks.

Vox chuckled against his neck, which only served to increase the number of squeaks he received, and he allowed static to carefully skitter across Valentino’s skin at the lowest power he could manage.

Valentino shuddered a little and tugged Vox closer before wrapping his wings around them both, and for the first time, Vox found himself melting into Valentino’s embrace.

He made a point of brushing his lips across Valentino’s face without once kissing his mouth, and Valentino’s breaths shook for a few minutes as his lower pair of hands rubbed comfortingly over Vox’s thighs.

They were both damaged, but perhaps, thought Vox, they could fix each other?

It was worth a shot.

Vox arched into Valentino’s desperate grip before allowing his own hands to roam over the moth-demon’s body, curious and teasing, and Valentino inhaled sharply, clearly surprised by the new development. He reared backwards to squint at Vox for a moment and once he realised that there was no trick, that Vox wasn’t being influenced by the small dose of saliva, he tugged the Television Demon further onto his lap and nuzzled against one of his antennae.

Vox slid his arms tighter around Valentino and relaxed against his ruff, and a small, happy smile pulled at his lips as he closed his eyes.

Alastor stared numbly at the floor, fingers biting into the worn leather armrests.

“He and Valentino seem truly happy together,” The Voice continued cheerily. “I thought Vox would take a little more time to move on from you, but I suppose there wasn’t that much to move on *from*.”

Alastor felt empty. Broken. Exhausted.

It was difficult to sleep these days. He didn’t *want* to sleep, not when Vox’s bloodied, battered body and anguished voice haunted his dreams.

“Valentino can give him everything he wants. I might not be able to feel love, but I’m not blind to it. Those two are a perfect match,” continued The Voice.

Alastor remained quiet, jaw clenched so tightly that it ached.

“It’s a good thing Valentino was there after you broke that poor, sweet picturebox. He’s been piecing Vox back together, little by little, and Vox has certainly helped Valentino overcome his fears of not mattering to anyone. That doting moth-demon means *everything* to Vox.”

Alastor’s ears flattened against his skull. He felt sick. He felt as though he were drowning.

“He used to miss you, but he barely thinks about you now. He hates you for what you did to him.”

Alastor had long given up trying to figure out whether she was lying or not. What was the point? It wasn't as though he could ever apologise to Vox. It wasn't as though they could ever be friends again - not if he wanted to protect the Television Demon from her greedy clutches.

He could suffer through her taunts and cruel words if it meant keeping Vox safe.

“All of this does present me with a delicious opportunity, though.”

A frown pinched Alastor's eyebrows together.

“Valentino would be quite miserable if Vox were to ever leave him. Perhaps more miserable than you. If Vox were to *vanish*... I'd have his pain alongside yours...”

Alastor snapped his gaze up to the ceiling, alarm forcing his ears upright. “You promised,” he hissed through gritted teeth. “You promised to leave Vox alone if I broke contact with him!”

She laughed, dark and unsettling. “I do love the taste of your fear, little fawn. If bringing Vox to my domain garners such strong emotion in *you*, I wonder what it would do to his lover?”

Alastor growled, eyes becoming dials. “I did everything you asked. If you *dare* take him, I'll-”

The lights flickered before blowing out, plunging Alastor into darkness. A gentle, cool wind swept through the bookshop.

“You'll *what*?”

Alastor bared his teeth. “I'll find a way to make you suffer.”

She chuckled cruelly and Alastor choked as the chain at his neck shimmered into view - its blackness sucking in all light like an empty void. The chain tightened and he was thrown heavily into a bookcase. He slumped onto the floor with a grunt of pain.

Just as he managed to crawl to his hands and knees, his chain tightened again and he was dragged through the maze of cases, hitting his head and limbs and spine on shelves and sharp corners, and he was tossed around like a rag doll before smashing through a glass coffee table to the far side of the shop.

He pulled a shard of glass from his cheek with shaky fingers and stayed on the floor, head bowed and submissive.

“You forget yourself, stupid fawn,” she said coolly. “You forget how insignificant you are. How powerless you are. The worst you can do is stop collecting souls for me and make yourself useless to me. And you know what happens then, don’t you?”

Alastor curled his hands into fists, giving the ceiling a baleful glare despite his body remaining submissive and pliant.

“No? Let me remind you: I will drag your worthless soul to my domain and watch you face trial after trial until you destroy yourself and join the other empty husks floating around me. No one will care about your death. No one will mourn you. No one will notice your absence.”

Alastor glowered at a particularly large shard of glass inches from his face, but remained silent.

“Do you understand, Alastor?”

Alastor gritted his teeth.

The pressure around his throat increased as the chain tightened a notch.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he managed with a vicious grin. The pressure eased.

“That picturebox makes you irritatingly disobedient. Speak to me in that tone once more, and I will make him mine. Allow him to distract you from your duties to me, and I will make him mine. Go to him for comfort, and I will make him mine.”

Alastor’s eyelids slipped shut in relief. She wouldn’t take Vox just yet. He was safe for now. She wanted Alastor to be miserable and lonely so she could feed off him. If being alone kept Vox out of her grasp, then Alastor would suffer in silence.

He would suffer for eternity if it meant keeping Vox safe.

Valentino peppered kisses down Vox’s neck, hands roaming down his sides, over his stomach and thighs, and Vox arched his back into Valentino’s chest, desperate for more.

Vox wanted to expand the business and he had decided that it was time to promote Valentino from employee to partner. Valentino was loyal and he had Vox’s best interests at heart and his content had brought Vox a spike in ratings. It was only fair that Vox rewarded him.

He had invited Valentino over for dinner and it was during dinner that he made the proposal. Company control would be split 70:30 in favour of Vox, but Valentino would be in charge of his own content, have his own channel, and be responsible for hiring his own employees. There were other details to figure out, but essentially, Valentino would be working alongside Vox instead of *for* him.

Valentino had jumped at the opportunity and Vox had cracked open the wine.

Now they were slightly tipsy, but otherwise warm and happy and craving each other's touch on Vox's soft couch.

Vox gripped Valentino's thigh and stretched an arm behind him to toy with Valentino's undamaged antenna, and Valentino made a contented hum and nipped at Vox's neck as he rubbed sensual circles over his stomach with a large palm.

Vox's eyes slipped shut as he leaned back against Valentino, and he grinned at the fluttery feelings in his chest. Those feelings had grown stronger these past weeks and for the first time in months, Vox felt... relaxed. Contented.

"Damn, you're gorgeous," whispered Valentino, words a little slurred but pleased nonetheless. "You're the best thing that has ever happened to me, amorcito."

Vox smirked and sent a gentle burst of charge through Valentino's antenna, and the moth-demon shuddered and nipped harder at his neck. "So fucking sexy," Valentino breathed, tightening his grip on Vox's thighs.

Arousal lapped at Vox's gut. They had so far been taking their time with one another - taking their relationship slow so they could properly get to know each other, but Vox was tired of slow. He wanted to *feel* Valentino. Wanted to *see* him.

He wanted to cleanse him of the filthy touches of the hundreds of other sinners and humans that had used and abused him. He wanted to worship Valentino, to show him what it meant to be loved and cherished. He wanted to pleasure Valentino in the ways he deserved.

He slid off Valentino's lap and turned, straddling him. Valentino tilted his head curiously, but he was smiling, eyes filled with love and devotion for Vox, and Vox's heart *soared*.

He kissed Valentino's cheeks and head and swept his hands over his arms and chest, grinning when Valentino squeezed his ass cheekily. He dropped into Valentino's lap again and ground their hips together, and Valentino squeaked in surprise.

Vox chuckled and gazed up at the moth-demon fondly, caressing the side of his face with gentle fingers before brushing his thumb over Valentino's lips.

"I'd like to kiss you. Is that okay?" he asked quietly.

Valentino blinked and suddenly looked uncertain. "Vox, I don't think-"

"I want you," Vox said softly, tracing Valentino's jawline. "It has nothing to do with your saliva. I want to feel you. I want to see you. I want to taste you. I want to touch you."

Valentino's antennae flopped forwards, vibrating slightly with his budding excitement and hopefulness. "Really?"

Vox's expression warmed and he pressed a doting kiss to Valentino's cheek. "Fuck me, Val. I want to be close to you."

Valentino startled before an amused grin stretched across his face. "How are you so crude and so romantic in the same breath?"

"Special talent," Vox said with a wink before Valentino stole his lips and splayed a possessive hand over his lower back.

Vox closed his eyes, letting Valentino's drugged saliva seep onto his tongue. Arousal pooled faster within him but other than that, his feelings barely changed. He already wanted Valentino, was already enamoured with him, so Valentino's drug barely had any effect on him other than to increase his craving for the moth-demon.

He rocked his hips against Valentino's and began to unbutton the moth-demon's shirt, and he inhaled sharply when one of Valentino's lower hands dipped beneath his waistband and wrapped around his stiffening cock.

Valentino grinned impishly at him and Vox laughed and dragged him in for another deep kiss.

Valentino stroked his cock slowly and Vox whimpered against his mouth before freeing Valentino of his shirt and pressing up against him. He was rewarded with miles of hard purple skin and lean muscle and he pinched a dark nipple. Valentino made a deep sound of interest, so Vox reached for the other nipple and swallowed when he found a small, metal ring there.

He pulled back to inspect the gold ring and Valentino smirked and squeezed his cock suddenly. Vox jerked and immediately latched onto the nipple ring, rolling it around his tongue gently and eliciting an aroused groan from Valentino.

Valentino started working Vox's sweater off and Vox sucked at the nipple once more before he unbuckled Valentino's belt.

Vox's sweater rode over his head and was flung onto the floor and Valentino abruptly froze.

Vox pulled back with a mischievous smirk. "Like what you see?" he teased before he really *looked* at Valentino's expression.

His smile faded the longer he watched Valentino wrestle with his own disgust.

Even through Valentino's drug, Vox felt ashamed. He tried to make himself smaller, leaning away from Valentino as he wrapped his arms around his unnatural body.

"Course you don't," he muttered, trying to play it off as a joke and failing miserably. He glanced around the floor for his sweater. "I mean, who would?" He reached for his sweater and smiled weakly at the horrified Valentino. "I'll uh... I'll just put this back on."

Finally, Valentino snapped out of his trance. "...No, it's okay," he said slowly, but it was obvious that he was disturbed by Vox's body. "I just... wasn't expecting..."

Vox smiled tightly, pain lancing his chest. He had hoped that Valentino might love him enough to accept what was going on beneath his clothes, but perhaps that was a little too much to ask.

Alastor wouldn't care what you look like, said a traitorous little voice at the back of his mind, taking him by surprise.

He suddenly felt cold and numb and he was hit with the realisation that he wanted Alastor to comfort him.

He dropped his gaze to Valentino's lap, clutching his sweater tight to his chest.

"...I'm sorry, Val," he said quietly. "I know it isn't exactly pretty."

Valentino was the one who loved him, not Alastor. Valentino was the one who put him together after Alastor broke him.

"Does it... hurt?" Valentino whispered.

Vox winced and glanced down at the silver circuit tracks carved into his body like a mesh of scars. Cooling vents ran parallel to his ribs - three on each side of his chest; long, gaping slashes like the gills of a shark. Either side of his spine were various ports and plugs that he used for data transfer, but they left ugly, deep holes in his flesh. At his hips were various lights - touch buttons that could be used to manually control his biomechanical systems, but they glowed and flashed unnaturally upon his navy skin. There were actual scars too - thin and paler blue lines that intersected the circuit tracks, sometimes breaking them.

“No,” murmured Vox. “They’re part of me.”

Valentino pressed his lips together uncomfortably before carefully touching one of the red lights flashing at his left hip. After a moment, two smaller red lights sprouted from it, rotating around the larger central light slowly. Valentino touched one.

Vox grimaced as his skin grew transparent, revealing the chaos of organs and machinery inside him.

Valentino recoiled, eyes wide. He snatched his hand away from Vox’s hip, looking nauseous.

Vox pressed the red light again and his skin became navy once more.

“Sometimes, my mechanical side needs updating or replacing. I need to see where the problem is,” Vox muttered weakly. He watched Valentino swallow and he flinched and started to pull his sweater over his head.

Valentino caught his arm. “I...” He hesitated and Vox averted his gaze, humiliated. Valentino blew out a breath. “I’ll get used to it. Give me some time.”

Vox pulled the sweater on. No one ever got used to it.

They stared at each other awkwardly for a moment before Vox sighed and stepped away from Valentino. Valentino let him go.

“I’m uh... I’m quite tired, Val. I think I’ll head to bed.” Vox hesitated, allowing a little fleck of hope to spark inside him. “You can stay the night, if you like?” He could really do with some comfort right now - something to prove that their relationship was strong, that they were still ok.

Valentino stared up at him for a moment, an uncertain look behind his eyes. He stood and stretched. "I think I should head off. I have things to do in the morning and I wouldn't like to wake you. You need the rest."

He eyed the door. Vox tried not to let his shoulders sag.

"Alright. Have a good night," Vox said and Valentino tipped his head a little in acknowledgement before escaping.

The door shut quietly behind him and Vox stared at it for a little while before wrapping his arms around himself and shuffling to his bedroom, alone.

And if a tear dripped onto his pillow, then there was no one there to witness it.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Vox :(Poor Alastor :(

Sorry for the wait! Life has become busy suddenly!

UPDATE: Fanart for this chapter by the lovely *AislinCeivun*:

Bluesky - <https://bsky.app/profile/ais4horn.bsky.social/post/3lffln3dtes24>

Tumblr - <https://www.tumblr.com/aislinceivun/756475062184476672/vox-pulled-back-with-a-mischievous-smirk-like?source=share>

Chapter 26: A Gambling Man

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alastor observed the casino for a moment, watching sinners stroll in and out of its doors with greedy smiles or despairing frowns.

He wrinkled his nose in distaste. He had never seen the point in gambling - the house always won, after all.

Why The Voice had requested he *collect* the casino's owner, Alastor neither understood nor cared.

He dissolved into a shadow and reappeared inside the casino, glancing around the tables for his target. He spotted the cat-demon at one of the blackjack tables and he sauntered over, taking a seat with his most unnerving smile.

The cat-demon eyed him warily as he shuffled the cards, preparing for a new game. The surrounding players stared at him with wide gazes, one player even abandoning the table.

Suddenly, the cat-demon grinned and tipped his head a little, but Alastor could see the calculation in his sharp eyes; the way his gaze darted briefly around the walls, clearly searching for Alastor's infamous silhouette.

Smart kitty.

"The Radio Demon? To what do I owe the honour?" asked the Gambling Overlord with a surprisingly deep, smooth voice.

Alastor's smile hitched higher. "I'm simply here to play games, my good man!" Alastor said, his radio filters heavy in his voice.

The cat-demon - *Husk*, The Voice had called him - smiled lazily at Alastor. “What sort of games?” he drawled.

Alastor tilted his head slightly. Clever cat! It had been a while since he had matched wits with another Overlord. Most Overlords were power-hungry, bombastic motor-mouths with more brawn than intellect. It seemed that this Husk character possessed some sort of *intelligence*, which was becoming more and more novel these days.

“That very much depends upon what’s on offer,” Alastor replied, flashing Husk a dangerous smile.

Husk sized him up for a moment and Alastor bit back a sigh. Perhaps he had judged the cat-demon too prematurely. Any moment now, Husk would either try to run, or he would leap across the table and take a swing at Alastor-

“I was hoping I’d float under your radar, but I suppose that was wishful thinking,” Husk commented as he toyed with the deck, working the cards with flashy tricks and sleight of hand as he continued to shuffle them. His gaze glinted with mischief. “Tell you what... If I can beat you at a game of my choosing, you let me go. If you beat me, I won’t put up a fight.”

Alastor raised an eyebrow before chuckling and a laugh track played over his filters. He wiped an imaginary tear from his eye.

“I’m afraid that just won’t do! See... I can’t just let you escape, my dear Husker. I’ve got plans for you.” He didn’t. He would just drag Husk back to the bookshop and let The Voice do whatever she pleased with him, as he’d done with countless others.

Still, he liked to toy with his prey before he knocked it unconscious.

Husk dealt him a hand and Alastor blinked down at the cards in surprise.

“A head start, then?” Husk suggested. “Twenty-four hours for me to run and hide from you.” He fixed Alastor with a sharp grin. “That way, you’ll get two games out of me. Cards and a round of Hide and Seek. What do you say?”

Alastor pondered over the strange offer. This Overlord was refreshing. He knew he couldn’t fight Alastor and he couldn’t outrun him... but could he *hide* from him? Could he beat him in a game of cards?

Alastor would cheat. Of course he would. He couldn’t beat the Gambling Overlord at blackjack in a fair game, but Alastor was more interested in the aftermath of Husk’s loss... would he really come willingly or would he lash out at Alastor?

“Do we have a deal, Alastor?” Husk asked, stretching a hand out. He looked very calm.

Alastor was suddenly hit by a memory of his first meeting with Vox and a terrible ache started in his chest. His smile wavered and Husk caught it, eyes narrowing for the briefest of moments before Alastor shook his hand.

“Deal.”

Green light met red in a small burst of energy as their pact was sealed. Husk’s lazy grin remained on his face as he started the game.

Thirty minutes later and it was all over.

Alastor smiled in amusement as Husk stared at his cards with wide eyes and low ears. The other players cursed their losses, but Husk had lost the most.

“...You cheated,” Husk whispered.

Alastor blinked placidly at him. “I did nothing of the sort, my good man,” he lied.

Husk licked his lips, tail swishing anxiously behind him. It was clear that he hadn’t expected to lose.

“Are you going to come quietly or should I ready myself for battle?” Alastor asked as though they were discussing the weather.

Husk clenched his fists before his gaze darted to the door and he took flight with a growl. Alastor watched him go, intrigued.

Let the hunt begin.

Alastor side-stepped another explosive card, clicking his tongue in disappointment.

It turned out that Husk was like every other Overlord he chased.

“Come now, Husker. If you continue in this manner, I shall have to take forceful action. If you surrender yourself, it will be far less painful for you.”

“Fuck you, you creepy psychopath!”

Alastor suppressed an eye roll before dodging another card. He twirled his cane between his fingers as he glanced carefully between the buildings. Husk was using the darkness to his advantage, but the cards were thrown from above, so Alastor knew where to look for the other Overlord.

He spotted the swish of a tail and he smiled in amusement. He sent a silent command for his silhouette to scale the building and approach Husk from behind as he turned his head to a different building, speaking to it as though he thought that was where Husk was hiding.

“Now, now. Let’s be civil. There’s no need for violence.”

“Shit!”

Alastor’s smirk widened and he watched his silhouette drag Husk off the edge of the other building and hurl him onto the pavement below. Alastor approached him leisurely as Husk struggled against the grinning silhouette. He pressed the end of his cane against Husk’s chest, leaning gently upon it, and Husk stilled with a scowl.

“Are we going to give in to the inevitable or are we going to put up another fight?” Alastor asked casually. “Because if it’s the latter, I’m afraid I’ll have to immobilise you. I’m on a schedule, you see.”

Husk bared his teeth at Alastor before falling limp and Alastor’s grin widened.

“Good boy!”

He dragged Husk to his feet and commanded his shadows to yank Husk’s arms behind his back. The cat-demon grimaced as the shadows curled tightly around his wrists and wings, restraining him and pushing him forwards.

“Where are you taking me? Your radio tower?” Husk growled out and Alastor shook his head.

“You haven’t put up nearly enough of a fight for that, my good man. I’m taking you somewhere special.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence and when Alastor pushed open the bookshop door, Husk stared at it warily.

“If you’re going to kill me, why not get it over and done with? Why bring me here?”

Alastor smiled blankly and opened the door wider, and his shadows shoved Husk inside. He stumbled and once Alastor had released the door, it locked of its own will behind them. Husk’s gaze raced around the empty room and he wiggled his wrists against his shadowy restraints.

“Look, this really isn’t-”

“Well done, Alastor,” purred The Voice as quietly as a summer breeze and Husk clamped his mouth shut before throwing a wild look at Alastor. “You caught him quicker than I anticipated.”

Alastor leaned against the door. “He didn’t put up much of a struggle.”

Husk stared at him for a long moment, silent and... thoughtful. Alastor twirled his cane around his fingers again and allowed his silhouette to stretch its legs. Husk continued to stare at Alastor, even as the silhouette loomed over him menacingly.

“How disappointing,” The Voice hummed. “No matter, I’m sure I can make him struggle.”

Husk flicked an ear as she chuckled darkly, but otherwise said nothing.

Alastor tipped his head a little before reaching for the door handle. “Am I dismissed?”

The lock clicked. Alastor pressed on the handle.

“She’s got you on a leash, hasn’t she?”

Alastor froze at Husk’s quiet words.

“I’ll give you my soul if you get me out of this damn bookshop.”

Alastor blinked and turned slowly to the cat-demon. He tilted his head at Husk, curious, and Husk eyed the ceiling warily before fixing Alastor with a firm look.

“Get me out of here and I’ll give you anything you want. I’ll willingly wrap your chain around my throat.”

Alastor raised his eyebrows and recalled his shadows, and Husk rubbed at his freed wrists.

“Alastor...” warned The Voice.

Alastor assessed the Gambling Overlord for a moment. “Why do you want him?” he asked her. “Why specify which Overlord? It’s rare you give me a name.”

The Voice hesitated and Husk jumped in before she could reply.

“I said *no* to her deal. She’s bitter over how I escaped last time.”

Alastor straightened, eyes widening. “...You escaped? How?” he demanded.

“I played a game and won.”

“You *cheated*,” hissed The Voice and the lights flickered haphazardly.

Husk smirked. “I never said I won *fairly*.” He glanced up at the ceiling. “You must be a pretty sore loser to have one of your *Collectors* come after me. Remind me to never play you at monopoly.”

Alastor’s smile widened as a cool wind picked up around them with The Voice’s mounting anger. He was starting to like this Husk fellow...

“I’m going to enjoy watching you face my trials, kitten.”

Husk smiled lazily. “Don’t take credit for what isn’t yours, darlin’. You aren’t clever enough to create those trials. You can’t even beat me in a *simple* game, never mind craft something so complex and psychologically challenging.”

The lights flickered faster and the wind gained speed. The smell of rot permeated the air.

Husk flicked his gaze to Alastor. “I’d rather be at your mercy than hers.”

“And why should I face her wrath to help you?” Alastor asked, fascinated by the other Overlord.

“Put a chain on me, spare my powers, and find out what I can offer,” Husk challenged.

How delightful! This man was cleverer than Alastor had given him credit for and his poker face was perhaps better than Alastor’s own.

Alastor chuckled and shook his head. “I’m afraid I’ll need more of a guarantee than that.”

Husk glanced up at the ceiling again before fixing Alastor with a serious look. "I know how to break her hold on her Collectors."

Alastor's ears pricked up as he stared at Husk.

"He's lying," snarled The Voice. "Don't listen to him, Alastor."

Husk smirked. "Sounds as though she's getting nervous."

"How can I trust you're telling the truth?" Alastor asked slowly.

"She told me things last time. Little things," said Husk. "She thought she had me in her grasp. She let a few secrets slip. I'll share if you get me out of here."

"He's bluffing!" The Voice hissed. "Alastor, don't be naive! You know there's no escaping me!"

Husk's smile was steady. "I escaped you."

She fell silent.

Hope blossomed in Alastor's chest and he held out his hand. "Deal."

Husk grinned viciously and shook his hand and The Voice snarled in outrage, shattering every lightbulb as Alastor threw the door open and hurled Husk out of the bookshop before she could lock it - before their magic had even finished intertwining in a flash of red and green.

Husk pushed himself off the floor, glancing in distaste at the emerald chain around his neck.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” he grumbled before turning his back on Alastor and stepping into the night. Alastor melted into the shadows and reappeared in front of him, setting the head of his microphone against Husk’s chest.

“Ah ah ah! You have secrets to reveal!”

Husk smirked lazily. “Clumsy me. How could I forget? Well, first off, you’re going to need to gather a few things for the ritual.”

Alastor raised an eyebrow. “Ritual?”

Husk shrugged. “She’s basically a cryptid.” He jerked his thumb at the plaque over the bookshop. “Hence the name ‘The Cryptid Bookshop’. Like I said, she ain’t that bright. All cryptids can be killed by one ritual or another. You just need the right tools. Now, I might not know what kills her, but I know how to suppress her magic.”

Alastor listened attentively, tail attempting to wiggle excitedly beneath his clothes.

If this worked, he would finally be free.

“You need the feather of a phoenix,” said Husk, “the blood of a virgin demon, and the horn from the skull of an angel. Once you’ve got all those things, you need to take them to the bookshop and chant three very specific latin phrases. Then, her contract with you will burn up.”

Alastor frowned. “How am I supposed to procure the skull of an angel? And the phoenix only exists in Heaven, where am I supposed to find one of its feathers?”

Husk shrugged. “I can only tell you what she told me. When you get all those items, I’ll write down the phrases for you.”

Alastor stared at Husk for a moment and the cat-demon rolled his shoulders. “Am I free to go, *boss?*”

Alastor narrowed his eyes. “Say, how did you get onto the topic of suppressing her magic? It seems like an odd thing for her to reveal to you.”

“I told you - she thought she had me. I was in that creepy void of hers and she thought she would win our game. Her tongue got loose.”

Alastor hesitated. “If her magic can be suppressed with a simple ritual, why did someone go to such lengths to trap her in Purgatory?”

Husk paused a fraction too long and Alastor grinned wickedly and hauled the cat-demon closer by his chain.

“You’re lying to me,” he snarled and Husk smirked slowly.

“For all your vicious reputation, you’re easy to fool.”

Alastor’s body cracked and twisted into something grotesque and he towered over Husk with a disturbing grin. “You would send me on a wild goose chase to keep me busy, to distract me from torturing your worthless soul?”

Wariness flashed across Husk’s expression. “You were desperate enough to believe me. Can you blame me for wanting out of there? I got lucky once, I won’t get lucky again. I’ll lie, steal, and cheat if it means staying out of that void.”

Alastor’s claws closed around his throat and Husk choked. Fury washed over Alastor like a tsunami. For a moment there, he had dared to believe he could rid himself of her. For a moment, there had been hope that he could fix things with Vox without fear of repercussions.

In reality, he had ensured that she would be more violent with him the next time he entered the bookshop. She would punish him for disobeying her - for stealing Husk from her grasp.

He growled and dragged Husk towards the door by his throat. If he threw the cat-demon inside, perhaps she wouldn't punish him quite so severely.

"I know how to beat the trials!" Husk grated out as he struggled against Alastor's tight grip.

"Liar," hissed Alastor.

"I'm not! I really do know how to beat them." He gagged against Alastor's claws.

"Then you should be perfectly confident in facing them," Alastor said as he pushed down on the door handle.

"I can't!" Husk choked out, ears flattening against his head. "I'm not... I'm not strong enough to beat them."

Alastor glowered at him and Husk averted his gaze, seemingly ashamed.

"And I don't trust anyone enough to help me through them," he said quietly.

Alastor loosened his grip a fraction. "What do you mean?"

Husk pursed his lips. "She didn't tell me how to beat her, but she told me some things about the trials. About the people and creatures that had faced them. Take your hand off that handle and I'll tell you what I know."

Alastor's mouth drew into a thin line but he released the door handle and whirled Husk around to face him, keeping a solid grip on his throat.

"Talk. Quickly."

Husk swallowed. "You've got to overcome your fear or anger or whatever the basis of the trial is, but there's a trick to it. Those that face the trials alone never get past the third one. It all becomes too much for one person to handle. Those that face the trials in pairs or groups get further but never make it past the fifth trial."

Husk shifted beneath Alastor's palm. "She said the trials learn more about you as you get through them. It's all psychological. Start as a pair or group and the trials eventually separate you so you're practically facing them alone. They pit you against each other, test your relationships, make you turn on one another... Few souls have made it to the sixth trial, but those that do have the strongest bonds, the deepest trust in each other. Seven angels and two humans have made it to the sixth trial, but eventually, even their trust was broken. No demon or monster has ever made it to the sixth trial."

Alastor's shoulders slumped and he slowly released Husk's throat. "How do I know you aren't lying?"

Husk's ears remained pinned back. "The reason I was so desperate to get out of there was because I know I wouldn't even make it past the first trial. I'm too... damaged." He lowered his gaze and Alastor finally heard some sincerity in his tone.

His hand fell to his side and he shrunk to his normal size. "What else do you know about the trials?"

Husk frowned. "Bits and pieces. She really did think I was going to be facing them. It was as though she was giving me... hints?"

"Those who beat the trials will be able to set her free," Alastor said and Husk raised his eyebrows.

“That... sounds like a bad thing.”

Alastor nodded and shifted his gaze to the bookshop. The Voice liked to use the trials to threaten him, so she rarely gave him pointers on how to defeat them. Alastor was under no illusion that she would eventually grow bored of him and force him to face the trials, but more recently, she had started threatening to drag Vox into them. If Alastor could learn more about them, perhaps he had a shot at protecting Vox?

“Tell me what you know and I’ll let you stick around Hell a while longer,” Alastor said with a sharp smile.

Husk blinked then lowered his head in relief. Alastor grabbed his chin and forced him to meet his gaze.

“Lie to me again, and I’ll throw you back in there and broadcast your screams to all of Hell as a warning to every disrespectful *wretch* who dares to question me.”

Husk swallowed and nodded. “Understood.”

“Lovely.”

It wasn’t often that Rosie let something trouble her. Her husband, Franklin, was a worrier, but she had seen too much to worry over simple matters.

Alastor was no simple matter.

She wasn't entirely certain what had happened between Vox and Alastor, but something had broken and Rosie was starting to worry that whatever it was couldn't be fixed.

Discussing it with Alastor was as useful as talking to a plant pot. He skirted around the facts, muttered vaguely about not liking men and when she politely asked him to stop feeding her bullshit, he went off on a tangent about wanting to shield Vox from his traumatic past and the secrets that weighed him down, which was quite frankly, also bullshit.

Discussing the whole ordeal with Vox was an entirely different matter. Vox clammed up, a haunted, grief-stricken look flashing across his face, before his antennae would spark angrily and he would rant and hiss over how Alastor had left him broken and bleeding and vulnerable in a dark street because he was a cruel and heartless psychopath and *no, he wasn't crying, he was just angry, damn it, Rosie!*

Which... didn't sound like Alastor at all.

From what Rosie could piece together, Alastor had betrayed Vox. For reasons that only made sense to Alastor, the Radio Demon had suddenly pulled away from Vox and when Vox had tried to repair whatever had broken, Alastor had revealed a proverbial knife and stabbed Vox straight through the heart with it.

Of course, Alastor could make and break relationships however he wanted - and he often did - but something was *wrong* about the way he had gone about severing ties with Vox.

Rosie wasn't blind. Alastor had been head over heels for the charming picturebox even if he had been too nervous to admit it, and all of Pentagram City knew that Vox's heart belonged to the Radio Demon. They were a match made in... well, not *Heaven*, but they were certainly perfect for one another.

So why had Alastor cut ties with Vox so suddenly? And especially when it didn't seem as though he had *wanted* to? Vox was clearly heartbroken, but Alastor could barely talk about what had happened without averting his gaze or having his ears flatten against his skull.

It bothered Rosie immensely. Franklin said it wasn't any of her business, but Alastor and Vox were her friends and she hated to see them so upset with one another, so she had decided that it was indeed her business to get to the bottom of things and perhaps give them both a smack over the head and push them towards each other.

Which was why she had invited Vox over.

She also wanted to assess this Valentino fellow. She had heard a lot about him from Alastor and so far, she couldn't say she was impressed. Vox had better options. Like Alastor.

As foolish as he was.

She plastered on a grin as she invited Vox and his very tall lover inside. "Oh Vox! It's lovely to see you! Come in, come in. Introduce me to your tall, dark, and handsome friend."

Vox glanced at Valentino and *oh, wonderful!* There was some tension there. The sort of tension that led to doubts about a relationship. These two wouldn't last the year.

Her smile widened.

"Hey, Rosie. This is... This is Valentino. He's, uh..."

Hesitation from Vox and a guilty grimace from Valentino. How marvellous! Not the most solid of relationships, it seemed.

"Friend? Boyfriend? Bit of fluff on the side?" Rosie asked cheekily, earning herself a horrified look from Vox. It was always fun to push his buttons - she could see why Alastor enjoyed his company so greatly.

"Uh... Well..." Another uncertain glance at Valentino and an ashamed wince in return.

And then Valentino frowned and looked at Vox and wound a possessive arm around his waist.

“Boyfriend,” Valentino said firmly and this seemed to startle Vox. He glanced up hopefully at Valentino and the moth-demon smiled softly in return before kissing the tip of an antenna, and Vox melted against him with a quiet sigh of relief.

Rosie’s smile faltered.

Valentino shot her a mischievous grin. “But who says I can’t be all three?”

Vox looked as though he wasn’t sure whether to be scandalised or hopeful.

Valentino rubbed circles into Vox’s hip with a thumb and held out a hand to Rosie. She placed her hand in his carefully and Valentino suddenly stooped to brush his lips against her knuckles. He remained bent over as he smiled warmly at her. “A pleasure to meet such a dear friend of Vox’s. He speaks of you so fondly, ma’am.”

Rosie forced a smile.

Well, shit.

Handsome, humble, and polite. And Vox was looking at him the way he had looked at Alastor in those early days.

This was going to be more challenging than she had expected.

“Take a seat. I’ll get us all some tea.”

Things were hardly fixed between them after the other night's... faux pas, but Valentino hadn't stopped touching him since Rosie had invited them into the back room of the emporium, so Vox figured they weren't *too* damaged.

He leaned into Valentino's side and the moth-demon squeezed his middle gently as another hand slipped over his knee. Vox relaxed. They were fine - they had a couple of things to talk about, but Valentino was still here. He wouldn't abandon Vox like-

"Alastor's been looking exhausted lately. I'm worried about him. Have you spoken to him recently?"

Vox stiffened and narrowed his eyes at Rosie. "Why would I have spoken to him recently? After everything he did to me?"

Rosie blinked placidly at him. "Friends fight all the time. Perhaps if you two swallow your pride for a few minutes, you might figure out that this was all a misunderstanding."

Vox laughed bitterly. "Rosie, I spent *months* trying to talk to him and it nearly got me killed. It wasn't a simple misunderstanding."

Valentino shifted in his seat and Vox slid an arm around him. "I'm happy now. I have someone who wants me, someone who loves me. Someone who won't abandon me or hurt me. Alastor means nothing to me. He's part of a past I'd rather like to forget." He shot her a pointed look. "If that's okay with you?"

Rosie frowned worriedly into her tea. "Without your friendship, Alastor has..." She licked her lips and caught Vox's gaze. "Vox, there's something wrong with him. He looks worn out. Thin. Dull. I wonder if maybe there's something else going on... Something he isn't telling us."

Vox pressed his lips together. “That’s his problem - he’s got too many secrets.” Irritation prickled his words. “Look, Rosie, I know you’re friends with him, but he isn’t my problem anymore. He does whatever he wants, whenever he wants and he doesn’t care how it affects his friends or the people who care about him. With all due respect, he’s a piece of shit.”

Rosie scowled at him and Vox gestured to Valentino. “I’ve got better people to worry about.” His gaze softened. “And that includes you, Rosie. Don’t let him drag you down.”

“Twenty years of friendship doesn’t just vanish,” Rosie said gently. “You must care about him a little? What if he’s in trouble? What if... What if someone is *forcing* him to act like this?”

Valentino shifted a little in his seat. Vox glanced at him with a frown. Why was Rosie pushing all this shit in front of Valentino? It was a little rude, wasn’t it?

Rosie blinked at Valentino, then returned her gaze to Vox. He shook his head in exasperation.

“No one *forces* the Radio Demon to do anything,” he said, then he thought about the chain around Alastor’s neck and the time all those years ago when he had lingered outside the bookshop, watching Alastor be hurled around by it, panic in his expression and distress in his gaze before he-

Vox’s eyes widened.

No, surely... surely not? That... That chain around his neck was just- *Plenty* of demons held soul contracts, they never- What would the thing in the bookshop even have to gain from-

He thought about how Alastor was forced to drag sinners back to the bookshop for the creature within it to feed upon. He thought about how *tired* Alastor often looked after a night at the bookshop, how dull his eyes grew and how strained his smile became. He thought about the stitches at Alastor’s lips, forcing him to keep a smile and he had always assumed that was part of Alastor’s demonic form, but what if they weren’t? What if the thing in the bookshop had put them there when it had snapped a chain around his neck?

Alastor had forbidden him and Rosie from entering the bookshop because he said he was afraid of what would happen to them if they did, but what if the creature in there had asked Alastor to lure them in? If he refused, what would the creature do to him? How would it punish him?

His fans flicked on as his temperature skyrocketed. His thoughts raced and his pulse quickened to a gallop. No. No, no, no... He couldn't have missed-

Alastor would have *told*-

The thing in the bookshop couldn't have been the cause of-

Fuck.

He clutched his chest, antennae fritzing as his face glitched. Panic surged through his systems, dragging with it all the emotions he had tried to suppress these past months - the heartache and anguish and misery and fear.

How could he have been so *stupid*?

He leapt from his seat then staggered as his blood pressure abruptly dropped, and Valentino bounced to his feet and caught Vox with an alarmed look.

“Voxy?”

With wide eyes and a screen full of errors, he clutched Valentino's shirt. “That night, did you see if there was a chain around his neck?” Vox asked desperately, voice filters interfering with his words. “Did he look upset or- or *pained*?”

Vox couldn't think clearly. The silhouette had attacked him, but it hadn't done so until Vox had threatened to walk into the bookshop after Alastor had left. Alastor had frantically shoved him out of the bookshop that night and he had clutched at Vox, and Vox at the time hadn't been sure if Alastor was trying to hold him close or push him away.

And then there was everything before that night - all the insults and attempts to keep Vox at a distance, but the actions didn't fit the words because Vox had kissed Alastor in his grief and Alastor had *kissed back*. Alastor kept talking about protecting him before he had finally used violence to push Vox away entirely.

Vox felt nauseous as the puzzle pieces slotted together. Something *was* wrong with Alastor and he had missed it.

Valentino frowned. "I don't... I don't remember."

"Think," hissed Vox frantically. "You said you watched him leave - did he leave willingly or was he *dragged*? What happened, Valentino? What did you see?"

He hadn't realised it at the time, but he had been deaf. What if... What if Alastor had stayed?

Alastor had asked his silhouette to *stop*. Twice. He remembered it clearly - the anger in his voice as the silhouette laid into Vox... And then after the silhouette had smashed his face up and deafened him, gentle hands had touched his shoulders and Vox had electrocuted them because he was afraid and in pain and-

Shit. Alastor's frequency that night had been all over the place. His static was chaotic. Vox had even pointed out how miserable and angry and upset Alastor had felt and the Radio Demon hadn't argued. Then the lights in the bookshop had flickered and Alastor had become *hostile*.

What if the thing in the bookshop was threatening Alastor? Making him push Vox away?

Or maybe...

Maybe it was threatening *Vox*, and Alastor was trying to keep him *safe*.

Valentino licked his lips. "...He left willingly, Vox. I told you that before."

That didn't... It didn't make sense. It didn't *fit*.

"How would you know?" Rosie asked with a scowl. "You weren't there."

Vox and Valentino turned to her with wide eyes and Rosie stood slowly, narrowing her gaze at Valentino. "They were alone that night."

What?

Vox snapped his gaze to Valentino.

The moth-demon frowned at Rosie, antennae lowering. "They weren't. I was watching. I was hidden."

Rosie put her hands on her hips. "So you *watched* Alastor beat the shit out of Vox and didn't think to step in?"

It was always a delight to hear Rosie curse, but Vox was too busy thinking about how valid her point was. He slowly uncurled his fingers from Valentino's shirt.

Panic flashed across Valentino's face and Vox's eyes widened.

“I... I had no chance against Alastor,” Valentino said. “And it happened so quickly... I was stunned. If I had tried to help, Alastor would have attacked both of us.”

Vox stepped backwards with a scowl. “I thought you just said he left? I was on the floor for a long time. Why didn’t you come help me then?” He narrowed his eyes. “If you were watching, why did I have to find my own way home?”

Valentino stared at him for a long moment and Vox realised he was trying to scrape together a response. His breath hitched.

“You weren’t there,” he whispered in horror.

“I was,” Valentino insisted. “Otherwise, how would I have known you were hurt? How would I have known where to find you?”

“Alastor’s told me a lot about you, Valentino,” Rosie said, voice harsh and expression filled with a surprising amount of anger. “And I must say, I don’t like what I’ve heard. He told me how you threatened him, how you threatened to reveal his secrets. Now, I know how stubborn that man can be, but the things you said to him...” Her face darkened. “No one deserves to have their fears flaunted in front of them like that.”

Valentino paled and Vox’s head swivelled between the two. “Fears?” His gaze snapped to Valentino. “You told me you confronted him about *me*. You said you let your feelings get the better of you, that you saw him as some sort of obstacle. You never mentioned his *fears*.”

He turned to Rosie with wide eyes. “What fears? Alastor said Valentino learned about his chain, but he never mentioned anything about having his fears-” He cut himself off at Rosie’s subtle grimace.

She knew something that he didn’t.

Electricity crackled across his frame as he whirled on Valentino. “You’ve been lying to me,” he growled dangerously, fists clenching.

Valentino stepped backwards and held his hands up. “...No. No, I was there. I watched Alastor break you. I watched him abandon you.”

Charge danced over Vox’s fingers as he advanced on Valentino. “Did he speak? Did he answer any of my questions as I lay bleeding on the ground?”

Valentino shook his head slowly. “He just... left.”

“So you watched me have an entire conversation with myself, watched me disappear into the power grid, and it still took you that long to come and help me? You let me struggle with my own burnt out components, let me knock myself unconscious, and only *then* did you think to step in?” Vox growled.

Valentino’s mouth opened and closed for a moment and he slowly backed away from Vox.

“You weren’t there,” hissed Vox.

“You took advantage of Vox when he was at his most vulnerable,” Rosie said and the air grew pressurised, weighing heavy on Vox’s head and chest as a low, familiar hum started up in the background.

Rosie was readying her hive of cannibals, like a queen bee communicating with her workers.

Valentino’s antennae twitched and he looked between Rosie and Vox with a panicked expression.

“I... I didn’t mean to! It wasn’t my fault! I... I really did try to help him!” He turned to Vox desperately. “You know I care for you. You know I’d never purposely hurt you.”

Vox pressed his mouth into a thin line as he glowered at Valentino. “Tell me the truth, Valentino. Were you there that night?”

There was a long pause before Valentino licked his lips nervously and slowly shook his head.

“Get out,” snarled Vox.

Valentino hesitated and he reached out a hand towards Vox. “Amorcito, please. I love you. I was still there for you. I still put you back together after Alastor broke you. I’ve only ever wanted to take care of you.”

“You lied to me!” Vox snapped. “I’ve spent *months* thinking that Alastor turned on me for no reason! That he abandoned me! And you *confirmed it!* You said you watched him walk away, and I’ve felt nothing but misery and grief since then. I *hated* him. And now I learn that he might not have left me willingly. He might have been forced into keeping me away. He might be in trouble and I’ve spent *months* feeling sorry for myself instead of trying to help him, because *you lied to me.*”

“He attacked you!” Valentino whined, edging towards the door. “Whether I was there or not, it doesn’t change the fact that he tore you apart.”

Bile crawled up Vox’s throat at the sudden slew of conflicting feelings. Valentino was quite right - Alastor had still attacked him and the betrayal didn’t hurt any less than it had all those months ago... but there was a possibility that Alastor had pushed him away to *protect* him.

And that changed *everything*.

Because that meant that Alastor still cared about him.

It also meant that Alastor needed *help*.

“I trusted you,” Vox growled as a charge built between his fingertips. “I chose you over him.” He shook his head angrily. “How foolish of me.”

Suddenly, Valentino bared his teeth, wings fanning wide with fury. “You chose me because you couldn’t have him! I was a consolation prize! The less desirable option! I was a way for you to distract yourself from him! You *used* me!”

Vox bristled and ignored the guilt rolling around his stomach. “I cared about you.”

“Yet you’re so quick to turn on me!” Valentino yelled, fists clenched before he slid his fiery gaze to Rosie. “And you’re a fucking bitch too!”

Vox raised a hand reflexively at the threat towards Rosie, and electricity coursed through Valentino’s body. He howled in agony and staggered backwards before surging forwards and grabbing Vox by his turtleneck and slamming him against the table, sending their tea cups crashing onto the floor. There were frustrated tears in his eyes.

“Nothing I do will ever be good enough for you,” Valentino hissed. “You’ll always want *him*. I’ll always mean *nothing* to you.”

“I can’t trust you,” Vox said through gritted teeth before his left eye swirled hypnotically. “Let me go.”

Valentino struggled against the command for a moment before releasing Vox and stepping backwards. He looked distraught.

“It isn’t my fault,” he whimpered.

“You threatened Alastor,” Vox growled. “You lied to me. You attacked Alastor. You manipulated me. You disrespected *Rosie*.” He eyed the moth-demon in disdain. “Play the victim all you want, but you aren’t innocent. You’re a selfish piece of shit.”

“Everything I do is for you,” Valentino snapped. “I take care of you when you overwork yourself, I touch you when you need it most, I listen to you *bitch* about Alastor! I give you everything you need! Everything you want! Yet you’re still ungrateful!”

Vox’s chest *hurt* and he let his eyes slide shut. “You aren’t him,” he said simply.

Valentino straightened before he flashed his teeth at Vox. “And that’s the problem, isn’t it? You’re *obsessed* with him. You’ll always be miserable and lonely because there’s not enough room in that cold mechanical heart of yours for anyone else.”

Vox stared at Valentino for a long moment before he lifted his head a fraction higher. “My heart is human,” he said quietly. “Maybe if you hadn’t run away so quickly the other night, you might have noticed.”

Valentino pressed his lips together, even as shame danced behind his gaze. “Can you blame me for running away from a freak?”

He had clearly said it to get under Vox’s skin - to *hurt* him because he was also hurting. The problem was that it worked. Vox recoiled as though burned and all the insecurities and fears he had been carefully suppressing came bubbling to the surface, making him lower his gaze.

“Fuck you, Val,” he said quietly as Rosie’s gaze hardened.

“I think you’ve overstayed your welcome here, Valentino. You should leave, before you lose the opportunity to do so.”

The pressure grew heavier and the buzzing became louder. Valentino’s antennae flicked and twitched and he pulled a face at Rosie before stalking towards the door and slamming it

behind him.

Vox pursed his lips as he attempted to scrape his dignity off the floor. Rosie's hand settled carefully on his shoulder, tentative yet comforting, and Vox leaned into her touch, closing his eyes. She squeezed his shoulder reassuringly and he managed a small smile at her before the expression faded and his chest hurt for an entirely different reason as his thoughts drifted to a certain deer-demon.

“What if I can't fix it?” he asked softly, tone dripping with anguish. “It's been so long...”

She rounded the table and straightened out his turtleneck like a fussing mother. “He loves you too,” she said with a gentle smile. “Auntie Rosie knows these things,” she added with a wink.

Vox chuckled weakly, but his chest warmed and his heart soared and suddenly, there was *hope*.

“Those secrets of his...” Vox said slowly. “What exactly did he tell you?”

Her smile faded a fraction. “I think you'd better ask him that. It isn't my place, dear.”

Vox nodded and took a breath before pulling her into a tight embrace, and she made a soft noise of fondness as she squeezed him affectionately.

He pulled back with a hopeful grin. “As always, Rosie, it has been a delight, but I'm afraid I have urgent business to tend to.”

Rosie beamed, clasping her hands together excitedly.

“Go get him, tiger.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey look, a new character! And let's give a round of applause to Rosie, shall we?

Chapter 27: Possession Is Nine-Tenths Of The Game

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He awoke to the sound of frantic pounding on his door.

Alastor pulled a face as he peeled himself off the couch and he pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes with a tired huff. He always seemed exhausted these days. Perhaps it was an effect of the loneliness, or perhaps it was a result of the chain weighing heavy around his neck.

He grimaced as the room spun when he tried to stand and he rolled his aching shoulders.

The Voice had not gone easy on him last night.

Whilst he had managed to heal all the bloody wounds and bruises, somehow the pain lingered and Alastor closed his eyes to stop his mind from focusing on the areas of his body that hurt. He took a deep breath and briefly considered whether it was too late to throw Husk into the bookshop to somewhat appease his master, then once again decided against it.

Thankfully, The Voice had been too furious with him for psychological torture and had opted for physical agony instead, but Alastor had no doubt that once she had cooled down, she would cook up something truly insidious in an attempt at breaking his mind.

The desperate banging on the door restarted and Alastor sent it a filthy glare, ears flattening.

He pushed himself off the couch again and stumbled a little before steadying himself on an armchair. He took a deep breath and shuffled towards the door, gritting his teeth when the knocking grew louder.

He was going to eat whoever was behind that door.

He wrapped his fingers around the handle but recoiled quickly at the sharp prick of static.

His eyes widened and his heart stuttered.

...Vox?

The knocking halted and there was a long pause.

“...Alastor?”

Alastor inhaled sharply, one hand clutching his chest as he was taken off guard by the agonising clench of his heart after going so many months without hearing Vox’s gentle voice.

“Alastor, I know you’re there. I can feel your static.”

A sudden tear tracked down Alastor’s cheek, cool and grounding. He bit his tongue and found himself leaning against the door, one hand spread wide over the wooden panelling, desperate to be near the Television Demon.

How had Vox found his new address?

“I’m sorry,” Vox said softly and Alastor frowned in confusion. Why was Vox apologising?

“I’m sorry for not figuring it out sooner,” Vox continued. “For letting my feelings get the better of me.”

Alastor swallowed thickly and he shook his head. No. Vox had nothing to apologise for. Alastor was the one who had hurt him, broken him, *abandoned him*.

But he wasn't allowed to apologise. The Voice might take Vox if he did.

He felt sick. Why had Vox returned? Why couldn't he understand that he was safer away from Alastor?

"You tried to tell me," Vox said. "You've been trying to protect me. She's *forcing* you to act like this, isn't she?" His voice softened. "I'm sorry, Alastor. I'm sorry for being so selfish. I'm sorry for leaving you to face her alone."

Alastor choked back a sob as his heart throbbed painfully. He let his forehead fall against the door and he squeezed his eyes shut, basking in Vox's gentle static. Now, more than ever, he knew that he didn't deserve Vox. After everything he had done to the man, Vox had still returned to him, apologising for something that most definitely wasn't his fault.

"Let me in, Al," Vox whispered and Alastor could tell that he was pressed against the door too. "Let me help you. *Please.*"

Alastor curled his fingers against the door and pushed himself against it, trying to get closer to Vox without putting him at risk, trying to feel more of his static, hear more of his soothing voice.

He could feel Vox's frequency attempting to harmonise with his, like comforting Alastor was an *instinct* of Vox's.

Alastor had been alone for so long.

His fingers closed around the door handle and he stopped himself at the last moment. No, he couldn't put Vox at risk. After everything he had done to protect the man, he couldn't toss his efforts away merely because he was sore and lonely.

“You don’t need to do this alone,” Vox said quietly. “Alastor, we can face her together. Together, we can overcome *anything*. ”

Alastor shook his head. Vox didn’t understand what she was capable of. “...Go back to Valentino,” he murmured finally. Vox would be safer with Valentino. He’d heard the rumours and he’d seen Vox’s shows. The two looked good together. Vox *almost* looked happy. Almost.

“I don’t want Valentino!” Vox hissed fiercely and Alastor jolted at the sharp bite of his static. “I want you!” Vox continued and his voice cracked. “I miss you, Alastor! I need you! I love you! Don’t you get it? Ten months apart and I still can’t stop thinking about you! I love that you’re trying to protect me, but the pain of being without you is worse than anything she could do to me! I’d rather spend my final days with you than live for an eternity without you!”

Alastor couldn’t breathe. He tightened his grip on the handle.

There was a long stretch of silence. “Open the door and tell me you’re sorry for hurting me,” Vox demanded quietly. “Tell me you’re sorry for abandoning me and let me forgive you.”

Perhaps it was the ache in his shoulders or the agony of not seeing Vox for ten months, or perhaps the guilt was just too much to bear, but Alastor’s resolve crumbled and he opened the door.

Vox tensed and stared despairingly at him.

Alastor swallowed. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Vox darted forwards and threw himself at Alastor, sliding his arms tightly around Alastor’s body, and Alastor clutched at him, slamming the door shut to give them both some privacy.

“I forgive you,” Vox breathed as he squeezed Alastor tighter, whimpering softly when Alastor nuzzled into his neck. “Fuck, you’re so thin.”

Alastor pressed deeper into Vox’s warmth, relishing the way their frequencies finally found a familiar harmony. He soaked up Vox’s worried, relieved static, and he shuddered when Vox rubbed his back slowly.

“I felt nauseous at the sight of meat,” Alastor admitted, voice barely audible. “The blood reminded me too much of you. Of... Of what I did to you.”

One of Vox’s hands tangled into his hair, keeping him tucked against his neck. “We’ll fix that. We’ll fix everything.” He kissed Alastor’s forehead, lovingly sweeping his hair out of his face. Alastor leaned into his touch and Vox made a sound of appreciation. “Fuck, you’re even more beautiful than I remember.” His palm slid down Alastor’s cheek, fingers grazing his jaw as he peppered desperate kisses over Alastor’s hair.

Alastor melted into Vox and Vox choked out a sob before his legs gave out and both of them sank to their knees, still clinging to one another, still letting their anguished static wash over each other’s frames.

“I’m sorry,” Alastor said again, suddenly overwhelmed by relief and affection and fear of what was to come. “I... I never wanted to-”

“I know,” Vox soothed, seemingly touching every part of Alastor available to him. “I know. I should have figured it out sooner.” He shifted and pulled Alastor into his lap and Alastor whined when Vox began petting his hair. “Promise me you won’t push me away again? Promise me you’ll let me help?”

Alastor swallowed and shook his head, trying to pull away from Vox. “No. No, I can’t let you-”

Vox caught his chin and their gazes met.

“Nothing she does will compare to the agony of losing you,” Vox said.

Alastor licked his lips. “You have no idea what she’s capable of.”

“Then let me fight by your side,” Vox pleaded, carding his fingers through Alastor’s hair. “Let me fight for the man that I adore. Let me fight for the man that adores me.” He cupped Alastor’s cheeks with both hands. “Let me make my own choices, Al.”

Alastor’s fingers curled into Vox’s sweater. “I don’t want her to take you,” he whispered.

Vox smiled. “Then fight for me.”

Fear blossomed inside Alastor’s chest. “You haven’t seen where she takes people. If you knew, you’d run.”

Vox brushed a thumb over Alastor’s cheek. “I won’t leave you to face a monster alone.”

Alastor’s protests died on his tongue and he stared at Vox as the epiphany struck him.

Vox would never toss him away. No matter what Alastor faced, no matter how shameful or vile or disturbing, Vox would be there. Vox wouldn’t leave like Harriet did, and he wouldn’t simply comfort Alastor after the monsters attacked, Vox would fight them off before they could even get close. Vox would never judge him, would never be repulsed by what he had faced. He wouldn’t shy away from The Voice and he would beg, steal, lie, and cheat if it meant freeing Alastor from her clutches, because Vox loved him enough to discard his own dignity and muddy his reputation. Vox *trusted* Alastor with his entire being, even after everything Alastor had done to him.

It was time Alastor started trusting Vox.

Alastor nodded slowly before tugging Vox closer by his sweater and slotting their lips together.

Vox made a ragged sound of relief and kissed him back, hard and frantic as he wound his arms tightly around Alastor's body.

They broke for air and Alastor pressed his forehead against the top of Vox's screen as he settled in the Television Demon's lap.

"I love you too," he whispered.

Vox's eyes widened. "Fuck," he said weakly before he suddenly flipped them over and pinned Alastor to the floor by his wrists. He crushed their lips together and Alastor vaguely wondered how Vox's lips could possibly be that *soft* when his head was a television, before deciding that he didn't care as long as Vox kept kissing him like *that*.

"You broke my heart," Vox hissed, tightening his grip on Alastor's wrists and nipping his lip sharply. "You abandoned me in the middle of the street."

"No," murmured Alastor in between kisses and nips. "No, I never left you. I was there. You couldn't hear me."

"Prove it," growled Vox and Alastor gasped as Vox's electricity flowed through him, enough to ignite his fight or flight response. His tail struggled to straighten beneath his clothes.

Instinctively, he commanded his shadows to curl around Vox's limbs, protective and clingy and *possessive*. He had missed this dangerous dance of theirs.

"Prove you stayed," Vox said viciously, increasing the current until Alastor's pulse raced at the stimulation. "Prove you beat me half to death out of love."

Alastor squirmed beneath Vox but the other Overlord had him pinned. Yet, Alastor wasn't afraid.

Contrary to popular belief, Vox wasn't the only demon capable of recording audio. Whilst Alastor couldn't capture visuals, he *was* a master at radio and all things sound. Alastor searched quickly for the sound package and it played in full stereo for Vox's audio inputs, complete with the soft crackle of static that often accompanied Alastor's voice.

"If that czz sil-hooo-uette is part of-of-of-of yyyyour emotions, you-you-you musszzzt truly hate m-me."

"No. Never. I love you. I love you, Vox."

A pause.

"Why? Why would you do this to him? He's going to think I've abandoned him! He's going to think everything I've said these last months is true! He's going to think I've beaten him to a bloody pulp and left him in the middle of the street!"

Alastor's voice cracked. "I... I can't leave him like this. I don't want to leave him. I... I was supposed to... I was supposed to take care of him. I was supposed to stay by his side. He made me happy. I don't want to do this without him. I don't want him to despise me!"

"A-a-are you sssstill there? Ala- zzzsss- tor?"

"Yes. I'm still here, darling."

"W-w-why am I-I-I-I not tch good enough tzzzzz to mmmmake you st-st-stay?"

"You are."

Another pause.

"Is this really the only way to protect him?"

A soft, devastated sigh.

"...So be it."

"You rrrreally abandoned m-m-m-me czzz like thissszzz?"

"I'm still here, my love. I tried to heal you. She won't let me."

"Fuck you, Ala- sszzz -tor."

Vox's face crumpled and Alastor smiled sadly at him. "I never abandoned you, my love. I was there until the end."

Vox trembled and his antennae sparked before his electricity receded and he collapsed onto Alastor with a broken sob. Alastor held him, wrapping his shadows more securely around his limbs and body as Vox cried into his chest.

"I thought you left," Vox sobbed and Alastor rubbed his back. "For *months* I thought... I thought you..."

"I let you believe that," Alastor murmured. "I thought I was protecting you."

Vox clutched angrily at his shirt. "Asshole," he choked out.

Alastor ran his finger along an antenna and Vox whimpered and snuggled into him. "Say I'm yours," Vox begged.

Alastor's heart ached. He kissed the top of Vox's screen. "You're mine. Your body is mine. Your heart is mine. You belong to me, Vox."

"Say you love me."

Alastor narrowed his eyes and placed a protective hand over the back of Vox's head. "I want you. I need you. I adore you. I love every inch of you, Vox. I always will."

"Again."

Alastor tilted Vox's screen up from his chest and smirked when he caught how red the Television Demon's face was.

“I love you,” Alastor said slowly, firmly. “I’ve loved you for a long time. I love being with you. I love your smile. I love your laugh. I love your stubbornness and determination. I love your intelligence. I love your loyalty and companionship.” He brushed his fingers along the side of Vox’s casing. “And I’ve missed you more than you could ever imagine.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure I *can* imagine it,” Vox said drily before sliding his fingers through Alastor’s against the side of his face. He closed his eyes and Alastor found himself relaxing for the first time in months as he studied Vox’s relieved expression.

“Again,” Vox whispered.

Alastor grazed their lips together. “I love you, Picturebox,” he breathed, lips brushing Vox’s with every syllable and the Television Demon shivered before cupping Alastor’s cheeks with both hands and kissing him hard and desperate.

Alastor swiped a tear off Vox’s screen with his thumb as they parted and he slid a possessive arm around the Television Demon’s shoulders. Vox melted into him, clutching at his shirt before kissing him again, over and over until Alastor’s lips were kiss-bitten and swollen.

“I’ve got you,” Alastor soothed when Vox began to tremble, and he lifted a hand to a long antenna, rubbing his thumb and forefinger up and down its length in a rhythmic motion. “Easy, Vox.”

Vox pressed his face into Alastor’s chest, his shaking worsening. He clutched tighter at Alastor’s shirt and Alastor’s shadows curled protectively around him. Alastor stroked his back and continued toying with his antenna as Vox made a poor effort at stifling his sobs.

Alastor frowned, guilt gnawing at his stomach as he watched Vox break down. He had caused this. He had destroyed Vox’s hope and confidence and happiness. He had done so to protect him, but now Alastor realised that he should have told Vox everything from the start. Vox would have stood by him, no matter the risks.

Alastor had caused Vox more agony than The Voice could have dreamed of causing.

He hooked his chin on top of Vox's boxy head. "I'm sorry," he whispered as Vox trembled against him. "I'm so sorry, Vox."

Vox nuzzled into his chest before finally pulling back to look at Alastor, and Alastor noticed for the first time how truly *drained* Vox's gaze was. Exhaustion pulled at his digital features and Alastor swallowed as shame filled his gut.

After a moment, Vox smiled tiredly and raised a hand to one of Alastor's ears, petting it tenderly and carding his fingers through soft, red fur.

"I've missed these so fucking much," Vox said, laughing weakly.

Alastor's tail once again tried to wiggle where it was trapped beneath his clothing. He flicked the opposite ear to amuse Vox, then leaned pointedly into Vox's petting with a contented hum as tension eased from his frame.

They enjoyed each other's touch for a few minutes before Vox peeled himself off Alastor and clambered to his feet. He straightened his sweater and offered Alastor a hand, which Alastor immediately took, letting Vox pull him upright as his shadows dissolved.

Vox cleared his throat, then said, in his best television presenter voice, "Apologies, that was very unprofessional of me."

Alastor snorted and quickly pressed into Vox, tucking his head under the Television Demon's as he snaked his arms tightly around the other Overlord. Vox made a quiet sound of surprise before coiling his arms around Alastor just as tightly, and they held each other for a long while, listening to the sound of one another's shaky breaths as Vox somehow managed to make all of Alastor's aches and pains stop hurting quite so much. Clearly, the man had magic hugs.

"Tell me we can have this," Vox whispered after a few minutes of silence. "No matter what she says or does or threatens, tell me we can have each other."

Alastor nodded, inhaling Vox's familiar scent and nuzzling into his neck.

One of Vox's hands rode into Alastor's hair. "Promise me."

Alastor touched the ports at the back of Vox's head, allowing a burst of static to flow from his fingertips as he did so. Vox inhaled sharply at the pleasurable sensation.

"No more pushing you away," murmured Alastor. "No more secrets. I promise."

Vox's shoulders sagged and he shifted slightly to tilt Alastor's chin up from his neck. He smiled tenderly at Alastor and Alastor's breath hitched, taken off-guard by the unconditional love and affection in his gaze. His heart raced and his ears lowered, humbled.

Vox kissed him again, soft and slow and adoring, and Alastor pressed his body into Vox's, wanting to be closer, wanting to feel his heat. A hand stroked his hair as another rubbed the small of his back, and Alastor curled his fingers between Vox's shoulders and traced the ports at the back of Vox's head, sending gentle bursts of static into them every so often and relishing the sounds of approval that fell from Vox's throat.

Alastor lost track of how long they stayed like that for, but he inhaled shakily when Vox finally released his lips and trailed doting kisses over his cheek and jaw and neck.

He fisted the back of Vox's shirt and made a quiet, wounded sound.

"Okay?" Vox breathed against his neck.

"How can you treat me so reverently after everything I've done?" Alastor said before he could stop himself.

Vox nipped his jaw in reprimand. “Because you thought you were protecting me. Because you always take care of me, even when I don’t see it. Because you’re letting me touch you even though you hate being touched.”

Alastor’s eyes fluttered shut. “I enjoy being touched by you, my dear. I’ve missed it these past months. I’ve missed all of you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” Vox said before sweeping his hand possessively over Alastor’s back, up to his neck and down to his ass. He paused and a frown pinched his expression as he slowly smoothed his palm over Alastor’s waist then down to his ass again.

Alastor stayed perfectly still, a smile threatening to give his amusement away.

Vox’s frown deepened and he rubbed Alastor’s ass again before sliding his hand over his waist.

“Do you... Do you have a fucking *tail*?” Vox asked, sounding deeply offended.

Alastor cackled.

“What the fuck, Alastor?” Vox huffed, sounding more and more put-out by the second. “You never told me?”

“I’m surprised you’ve never felt it before,” Alastor said cheerily. “You’ve danced with me plenty of times! You’ve definitely had your hand on it more than once.”

“You’re always wearing that damn coat,” Vox protested with a pout as he glowered at said coat hanging on the rack behind the door. “I’ve never noticed.” He palmed Alastor’s tail curiously through his clothes.

“Do you mind?” Alastor teased and Vox kissed his nose.

“Not at all, Bambi,” he drawled and Alastor wrinkled his features at the reference, prompting a laugh from Vox. He kissed Alastor’s nose again and the Radio Demon melted against him.

“Can I see it?” Vox asked curiously.

“You’ll have to take me out for dinner first,” Alastor teased.

“Tonight then? Seven?” Vox asked with a gentle smile and Alastor looked at him in surprise before his expression softened into one of complete and utter adoration.

“Alright.”

Vox beamed and tucked him under his head again and Alastor basked in his warmth, heart fluttering with joy.

Suddenly, Alastor felt as though he were drowning and suffocating all at once. He felt as though he was being pulled, no, *dragged* by something and he scrambled for purchase even though his body didn’t react. His eyes widened and he tried to open his mouth, but his jaw wouldn’t respond and it was as though something was forcing him out of his own body, or maybe deeper inside it.

And then he was saying words that he didn’t ask his mouth to utter.

“Vox, I… I need to show you something.”

It was his voice, complete with filters, spoken in the correct tone, spoken by *his tongue*. But the words weren’t his.

His heart raced and he tried to struggle out of Vox's grip, to warn him that something was very wrong, but his limbs wouldn't react and he couldn't prick his ears up or flash his tail to warn Vox because his own body refused to respond.

His breathing remained steady even as his pulse galloped and it was like watching someone else pilot his body even though his senses remained intact.

Vox smiled trustingly at him. "Oh?"

"It's... about the bookshop," Alastor said, a hint of nervousness in the voice he had no control over. Fear flooded his veins. What was happening? Why did he have no control over his own body?

A worried frown touched Vox's face and he cupped Alastor's cheek reassuringly.

Alastor was paralysed in the back of his own mind, forced to watch his body be commandeered by something else.

Or *someone* else.

He would have gasped had his body allowed him to.

The Voice. Was she... was she controlling him somehow? Through his chain maybe?

His panic sky-rocketed. He couldn't warn Vox. His heart pumped harder.

"Tell me," Vox said softly. "We can figure it out together. I promise."

Run, Alastor wanted to scream.

Instead, he smiled gratefully at Vox. “Come with me.”

They arrived at the bookshop and Alastor was desperate. He felt nauseous and hot and still he fought for control of his body to no avail.

Outwardly, he held Vox’s hand in a comfortable grip, squeezing the Television Demon’s fingers affectionately in a mockery of love.

He tried to bargain desperately with The Voice inside his mind since he had no control over his own voice, but either she couldn’t hear him or she was ignoring him.

This was what he had been afraid of. This was the psychological torture he thought she had forgotten about yesterday. He hadn’t realised she was capable of *this*.

He opened the shop door and the lights flickered on. Vox halted outside the bookshop, staring warily at the threshold.

“I thought you didn’t want me to ever go inside?”

Good man! Alastor could have sobbed. He once again tried to untangle his hand from Vox’s to no success.

“I promised you no secrets, didn’t I?” Alastor heard himself say and Vox looked at him for a moment before stepping inside.

Alastor wanted to vomit.

“Trust me?” he asked instead, smile tender as he squeezed Vox’s fingers.

“Always,” whispered Vox.

Alastor tightened his grip on Vox’s hand and Vox frowned, uncomfortable. A vicious grin broke over Alastor’s face.

“You never learn, do you, *dear*?”

Vox frowned in confusion and Alastor battered at the mental prison The Voice had locked him inside of. It occurred to him that his shadow was also trapped and if he concentrated, he could feel it clawing desperately at its cage, trying to protect Vox. It snarled and hissed and spat silently and Alastor renewed his frantic efforts to escape the confines of his own mind.

“...Alastor?”

“I’m getting rather tired of you hanging onto my coattails, Vox,” Alastor drawled before he cast his gaze to the ceiling. “He’s yours, just as you requested. I trust this is sufficient payment to break our contract?”

Vox straightened in alarm and snapped his gaze up to the ceiling as the lights began to flicker and a cool wind whipped around them. The door lock clicked and a few books tumbled off the shelves.

“Very good, little fawn,” said The Voice in her usual breathy tones.

Vox’s eyes widened and he stared at Alastor. “You... You wouldn’t do that to me,” he whispered, voice shaking. “You... You said you love me. You were trying to protect me. Something’s *wrong*. ”

Yes! Exactly! Something is wrong, Vox! Alastor thought as his heart pounded faster. He wished Vox could feel it.

Alastor's gaze softened, mocking and condescending. "I *love* what you can do for me, *darling*. You're so desperate for affection that you'll believe anything I tell you."

Vox tried to snatch his hand from Alastor's grip but Alastor held on, cackling in delight.

"No more secrets," teased Alastor in the same tone he had used when he was actually in control of his body. "No more pushing you away. I promise." His grin widened as Vox's face fell with heartbreak and confusion. "I love your laugh. I love being with you. *I've missed you so much*," he ridiculed.

Vox shook his head but Alastor saw the doubt in his gaze. "...You wouldn't do that to me. I know what I saw, what I heard. You-"

Another cruel peel of laughter tore from Alastor's throat. "My dear Picturebox, you are nothing more than an annoying piece of gum stuck to my heel. Perhaps I harboured some sort of... *sympathy* for you once, but you've become too familiar. Clingy. Boring. I tried pushing you away, I tried ignoring you, I even tried beating you half to death! But like a bad penny, you just keep showing up."

Irritation flickered across Alastor's face as Vox shrank away from him, hurt. Then, Alastor grinned sharply. "Imagine my delight when my *master* offered me a deal - a way to kill two birds with one stone! She needs a stubborn, *stupid* Overlord with power and I'd very much like to be free of my chain to her. The bonus is ridding you from my afterlife." He tilted his head to one side unnaturally and Vox finally ripped his arm from Alastor's grip, screen glitching with his mounting upset and confusion.

"No," he mumbled, shaking his head, but there was clear uncertainty there now and Alastor snarled furiously inside his own prison.

Stop this!

“You said...” Vox trailed off, his eyes darting from left to right as he tried to put pieces of a puzzle together that would never fit.

Please! Alastor begged to an entity that couldn’t hear him or didn’t care to listen.

“I lied,” Alastor said simply before gesturing around the bookshop. “To convince you to come here.” He winked. “Should have stuck with the moth.”

Vox looked devastated.

“But I love you,” he whimpered.

Alastor clicked his tongue in distaste. “Hmm. That sounds like a *you* problem.”

Alastor screamed inside his own mind.

Vox’s face contorted with fury and charge skittered across his frame in flashes of blue light. “You evil piece of-”

And then he was gone.

Alastor collapsed to his knees as he suddenly regained control of his limbs and voice. His shadow tumbled out of him and picked itself off the floor quicker than Alastor could, scouring the bookshop frantically for Vox.

Alastor staggered to his feet and looked around, heart racing so fast that he was worried he would pass out any second.

“What have you done with him?!” Alastor snarled, filters fritzing and body mutating into a more monstrous form.

“I told you not to cross me,” said The Voice calmly.

“Where is he?” Alastor roared, toppling a bookcase.

“Here, with me. He’ll face the trials like everyone else who comes here.”

The room spun and Alastor stumbled. “Bring him back!” He was going to be sick.

“No.”

Alastor collapsed to his knees. “Bring him back, you bitch!” he hissed.

“No.”

Alastor shook violently and bowed his head as his shadow screeched silently and began tearing apart the bookshop in its fury.

“Please,” Alastor said, softer this time.

“No.”

“I’ll do anything you ask of me,” Alastor whispered as a tear spilled over his cheek. “Please, bring him back. He doesn’t deserve to suffer for my mistakes.”

“You don’t need him. You have your kitten now,” she mocked. “Vox’s corpse will make a nice addition to my collection, wouldn’t you say?”

Alastor heaved. “Please bring him back,” he whimpered.

There was a long pause.

“You didn’t really think I’d let you have him, did you?”

Alastor squeezed his eyes shut and his stomach lurched again.

“After all of your disobedience? The *foul* attitude you have with me? Did you really think I’d let you *keep* him?”

He had hoped. Even if for only a moment. “Bring him back.”

She made a sound of distaste. “Do change the record, little fawn. You can’t have him back. He’ll face these trials like everyone else.” Her voice turned sweeter. “Now, what have we learned?”

Alastor trembled.

“We’ve learned,” continued The Voice patiently, “that punishment follows bad behaviour.” The chain around Alastor’s neck shimmered into existence. “I *own* you, Alastor. I own your soul and your body and your relationships. Never forget that.”

“Please,” Alastor begged, voice breaking. “*Please*. Take me instead. He doesn’t deserve this.”

“No.” She huffed in annoyance. “Now leave. Possession is rather exhausting. I’d like some time to recover and introduce myself to my new *friend*.”

Alastor choked as the chain tightened and dragged him out of the bookshop and into the street outside. His shadow raced after him and the door slammed shut and the lights flicked off, leaving Alastor and his shadow to stare despondently at the empty bookshop.

Alastor cried in silence.

Chapter End Notes

A couple more chapters before the time skip :) I'm sure Vox isn't going to be super jaded and bitter and exhausted after thinking that Alastor delivered him to The Voice to break his own chain :) He definitely won't become his glitchy, over-controlling, distrusting canon self now :)

Chapter 28: Alone And In The Dark

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom (take heed!)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

There was darkness above and below him. An empty void stretched around him, and the continuous white noise made his antennae spark for a few seconds before he took a steadying breath.

He walked forwards then wondered if he was walking at all - he had lost all sense of direction, all sense of space and time. He halted and frowned and began testing different frequencies on the void surrounding him, searching for some sort of response. When that didn't work, he let his static stretch ahead of him, searching for something, *anything* for it to bounce off.

Nothing.

"Where am I?" he asked into the nothingness and his words sounded dull and dead, like speaking in a vacuum.

"Purgatory," said a breathy voice.

Vox narrowed his eyes. "You're Alastor's master."

"Yes. I am a great many things, little television."

"Why have you brought me here?" Vox asked, charge dancing between his fingertips.

“I require sustenance. I require freedom. I have been requesting your company for years, yet Alastor has always been reluctant to deliver you to me. Recently, however, he has grown weary of you.”

Vox flinched before clenching his fists. “What will you do with me?”

“You will face my trials. Beat them and you will free me. Fail and you shall join your predecessors.”

Vox stiffened as a vile smell filled the air - a stench of rot and blood and death that had him subtly switching off the olfactory receptors hidden within the vents at his ribs. His breath hitched at the thousands of grey corpses floating around him, each in various states of decay, some twitching unnaturally, others staring at him through unseeing eyes.

They vanished suddenly and Vox swallowed.

“I shall feast on your emotions either way,” continued The Voice, amusement clear in her tone.

“Why should I free you?” Vox asked. “If you’re capable of so much misery and pain when you’re chained up, why should I release you into the world? Sounds like a bad time for everyone else.”

“Because if you free me, you will be released from the trials. You will be released from this place of darkness.”

Vox narrowed his eyes. “And you’ll turn Hell, Earth, and Heaven into your playground? No thanks, I’ll pass. If you’re going to kill me, get it over with.”

There was a short pause. “If you beat the trials, you can return home.”

“I’ll pass,” Vox said again. “Hell isn’t the happiest place in the universe, but with you invading it, there’ll be nothing but endless pain and misery and despair. I’d rather feel nothing. I’d rather die here and be another useless soul that failed you.”

A longer pause. “You’re... an interesting one. You might actually have a chance at beating these trials.” She sounded... excited.

“I won’t compete,” Vox said firmly. “I’ll fall at the first hurdle.”

“The trials won’t end unless you beat them. You’ll be forced to compete.”

Vox frowned. “Then how have so many died?”

“There are two methods of escape. Win... or forfeit.”

Vox’s frown deepened in confusion and The Voice hummed in amusement.

“They extinguished their own souls, sweet television.”

Vox’s stomach sank. So compete or kill himself? Those were his only options? Did he have the strength to end his own life? Could he ignore his pride, throw away his dignity like that? He had always been a fighter...

Still, releasing *her* wasn’t an option.

“And there are no other options? I can’t convince you to let me go?”

She chuckled. “There is *one* option.” A silver contract floated in front of his face, a white feather quill hovering beside it.

Vox snorted and pushed them away. “I’d rather die than be on your chain.”

“Then I’m afraid you’re out of options. You must compete.”

A pair of ornate iron gates appeared a few feet in front of Vox, illuminated by a dim orange light that reminded Vox of the bookshop.

“There are six trials based on your own pain, fear, lust, humiliation, despair, and fury. You must overcome them to move onto the next trial. You may choose others to compete with if you wish. They must consent to compete, however, before I can bring them here. Step forward when you are ready to begin or give me the names of those you wish to compete with.”

Vox eyed the gates for a moment before his mouth set into a grim line and he ran a series of internal system commands. His fans flicked off and his cooling vents slid shut and he queued up a list of complicated tasks for his processors to undertake.

He slowly untucked his shirt, revealing the colourful lights at his hips and he pressed a few, switching from a mostly biological functioning to a mostly mechanical one.

The heat built quickly and warnings flashed up on his screen, requesting that he open his vents now that he was relying on his mechanical systems to breathe. He ignored them and more warnings appeared, asking him to delete or postpone tasks to stop his processors from overheating when he wasn’t able to open his vents. He ignored them too.

He sent a couple more commands before pressing a flashing red button that had appeared at his hip.

A critical warning popped onto his screen and he closed it. A smaller white light sprouted from the one he had pressed and after a moment of hesitation, he pushed that one too.

A system command message appeared on his screen.

Override Success. CPU Core_temp Failsafe Disabled.

Vox shifted uncomfortably as the heat increased at an impressive speed. More and more critical warnings begged for his attention and he ignored them even as his screen glitched.

“What are you doing?” asked The Voice.

Vox remained silent and the heat gradually became unbearable. His legs failed and he dropped gracelessly to the floor, hundreds of error messages screaming at him. Smoke slithered out of his closed vents and his skin glowed faintly red with burning heat.

He trembled, tears evaporating on his screen before they could roll down his face.

“What are you doing, Vox?” The Voice demanded and for the first time, she sounded alarmed. “Answer me!”

He managed a vicious grin before the components in his screen melted and his display cut to black.

“Are you self-destructing?” she hissed, fury lacing her words. “No! You haven’t even started the trials! All that power *wasted!*”

A glitched, grating laugh fell from Vox’s overheating vocoder.

“Stop!” she snarled. “I’m supposed to feed on your misery and shame! On your agony! I have waited *years* for you! This is a waste of a soul! You have so much potential! You would be a *feast!*”

Another distorted laugh tumbled out of Vox. “*Zzzssstarve*,” he spat before his vocoder blew out painfully, melting half of his neck.

“No!” she screamed and Vox was reminded of a child throwing a temper tantrum. He flinched as more components in his body melted or blew and it wasn’t long before he was paralysed.

Suddenly, the air turned icy and Vox was surrounded by what felt like soft snow. His systems began to cool, so he queued up more commands, desperately trying to overwork his processors. He wouldn’t let her win.

Cold hands grabbed at him and he could do nothing as he was dragged across something that wasn’t exactly *ground* but wasn’t *not* ground either, before he was quickly stripped of clothing.

Something sharp bit into his wrist, tearing into the bubbling skin there.

Then, there were hands *everywhere*. On him, restraining him, *inside* him, pulling wires, ripping his flesh, snatching at components, and then... and then... they started replacing them. Fitting new components and cables and parts, and Vox’s screen flickered to life.

He jolted at the sight of the decaying, unseeing corpses repairing him and he shivered at their cold touch. They pressed the buttons at his hips and Vox inhaled sharply as his vents opened and his biological functions were restored. After a few minutes, the corpses shuffled backwards and Vox watched his own skin repair itself.

He scowled and looked up to find the corpses had vanished, leaving a flat expanse of snow around him. He noticed that he was on the other side of the iron gates.

They had dragged him through.

He gritted his teeth. “I won’t take part in your damn trials,” he growled and he began the process of overheating again.

“Voxy?”

He paused and turned.

“...Valentino?”

The moth-demon looked around with a fearful expression. “Where are we?” He frowned as he glanced back at Vox. “...And why are you naked?”

Vox’s eyes widened. “We’re-” He cut himself off and glanced back at the gates but found that they had vanished. He narrowed his eyes and recalled the sharp pain at his wrist. He looked down to see a word carved into his flesh.

Humiliation.

The wound healed over after a few seconds and he slowly raised his gaze to Valentino.

“You’re not real.”

Valentino frowned, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re part of this place,” Vox growled before turning his back on the moth-demon. “A trick.” He began walking; where to, he wasn’t sure.

Valentino padded after him.

“That’s probably true,” Valentino commented lightly. “If I were the real Valentino, I would have asked you to put on some clothes by now.”

Vox pursed his digital lips and resolutely ignored the creature shaped like the moth-demon.

“I wouldn’t be able to look at you,” Valentino continued before he raised an eyebrow at Vox. “Which is interesting, considering how many people I’ve let fuck me. I must think you’re pretty disgusting to not want to even touch you.”

Vox scowled. “Shut up.”

“Did that hit a nerve?” Valentino cooed with a sly smirk. “Tell me, amorcito... How does it feel to be looked at as something less than a person? How does it feel to be treated as a piece of machinery? An object? A *prop*?”

Vox startled as Valentino appeared suddenly in front of him with a lecherous grin. “Do people actually look at your face when they fuck you or is that boxy head of yours too inhuman? Do they ever take time to touch your body or do they move straight onto the main event? Has anyone ever *wanted* to touch you or have you always had to ask them?”

Vox’s fans flipped on as heat crept up his neck. “You’re not real. Val would never say any of this shit.”

“He wants to though. Did you see the way he looked at you? Did you see him swallow his own nausea? Did you see how quickly he leaned away from you? He didn’t even stick around...”

Vox bared his teeth at the creature. “I know what you’re trying to do. It won’t work.” He shouldered past Valentino but a hand shot out and caught his shoulder. He whirled on Valentino with a snarl.

...Only to come face-to-face with his mother and father.

He stumbled backwards in surprise and they scowled at him in disapproval.

They were just as he remembered them - his father with his stern expression and cigar in hand and his mother looking glazed and dishevelled and reeking of booze.

“What a fucking embarrassment you turned out to be,” growled his mother, words partially slurred as she raked her gaze over his body in disgust. “You were the biggest mistake I ever made.”

Vox clenched his teeth so tightly that they ached. He couldn’t will his limbs to move, paralysed by shock and a sense of anxiety that he remembered all too well from his childhood. He felt like a little boy again in the face of his parents’ disappointment.

“You ruined our lives, boy,” grunted his father as he took a drag from his cigar and blew it into Vox’s vents, making him cough and his fans double their efforts. “Did you know we tried dumping you in the trash when you were a baby? Damn do-gooder chased after us. Threatened to call the police. Made us pick you out again.”

His mother snorted. “There was dog shit smeared all over you.” She laughed to herself.

Vox shrank in on himself, trying to make himself smaller despite the fact that his demon form towered over them both. They had already told him about how they had tried to orphan him in a dumpster. They had told him multiple times.

“Wish you’d been born dead,” huffed his father. “Would have saved us the disgrace of what you turned out to be.” He suddenly raised his cigar and stubbed the end against Vox’s bare chest.

Vox yelped and leapt away, frowning down at the blossoming burn. He laid a protective hand over the burn and scowled at his father.

“There was nothing wrong with me,” he growled. “You made me feel like a freak. You made me feel worthless-”

“You *are* worthless,” scoffed his mother, flicking her blonde hair behind her ear. “The only reason I had you was because I didn’t know I was pregnant until it was too late to abort you. You shouldn’t have existed.”

Vox stiffened, mouth pressing into a thin line. “I think I turned out alright considering I never had parents.”

His father narrowed his eyes. “You turned into a fucking fag.” He curled his lip in disgust as he raked his gaze over Vox’s body. “And you ended up in Hell. You don’t deserve parents. You don’t deserve *anything*.”

Vox clenched his fists and lifted his head a fraction higher. “You have no idea what I’ve achieved. Despite everything you said to me, everything you *did* to me, all the abuse and abandonment... and I still achieved more than either of you.”

Vox bit back a gasp as his mother suddenly smacked the side of his head. He stumbled and froze at the sound of his father’s belt being unbuckled, fear filling his chest.

“You’re a disgusting, mouthy little pervert,” his father rumbled as he folded his belt. “Bend over, boy.”

Vox almost did. It was so ingrained in him to follow his father’s command that he almost sank to his knees and presented himself for a spanking, like he had so many times before. But then he remembered who he was, *what* he was, and he gritted his teeth and whirled on the man. Electricity crackled between his antennae and filters altered his voice to something more electronic.

“Raise that belt to me again and I’ll deep fry your ass, you arrogant piece of shit,” he hissed.

“How dare you speak to your father like that!” his mother snapped and Vox rounded on her too.

“How dare you speak to *me* like that, you drunk *whore*,” Vox snarled and he caught his father’s hand descending towards him from the corner of his eye.

He curled his fingers around his father’s wrist before the belt could strike him and he discharged electricity through the man’s body, blowing him backwards a few feet.

“Keep your damn hands off me!” Vox yelled, electricity sparking over his frame as his screen glitched.

His father raised his head, skin burned and inflamed. He bared his teeth in disdain. “You say that like I want to touch you. Like *anyone* wants to touch you.”

His mother suddenly darted forwards and pressed a light on his hip, and his skin became translucent, revealing every organ and mechanical system in his body.

Heat crept up Vox’s neck, tinging his screen pink.

“No one could ever want a monster like you, Victor. You’re made of spare parts and cheap, rusted metal. Trash. You’re worthless. You always have been,” said his mother coolly.

Vox winced at the reminder of his human name and he averted his gaze, screen flushing red with humiliation. “That isn’t true,” he said weakly. “I... I was loved. Alastor-”

He cut himself off. Alastor what? Loved him? Alastor had handed him over to his master. Alastor had left him to die out here - wherever *here* was.

His mother laughed cruelly. “Why would anyone love you? Look at yourself. Your body is hideous, vile, mechanical. How can you expect anyone to want someone, *something* like you?”

Vox recoiled, words failing him. He looked down at himself and winced, tried to cover himself with his own hands as his father snorted in distaste.

“Even your cock glows, you perverted freak. You’re fucking disgusting.”

Vox’s hand drifted to cup himself. The glowing was dim but there were a lot of wires and tubing and blood vessels in that area to allow him to retain normal bodily functions. The glow was less noticeable when his skin wasn’t translucent, but he couldn’t think clearly enough to press the light at his hip.

“I didn’t ask to be made like this,” Vox said quietly.

“We didn’t ask you to be made at all,” scoffed his mother. “No one did.”

Vox fell silent before he swallowed. “I matter to some people,” he murmured. “Like Rosie. Even Valentino.”

“The cannibal pities you,” said his mother. “She treats you like a lost, broken puppy. And the moth-demon? He’s just attention starved. He’ll latch onto anything that *looks* at him. He still thinks you’re repulsive though. He still *ran* from you.”

“You thoroughly destroyed that relationship, didn’t you?” his father taunted. “You ruin everything you touch.”

Vox stepped backwards. “I… He lied to me. I just- I wanted-”

“You wanted the pretty little deer-demon to like you back,” teased his mother. “Except he doesn’t. He never did. He never will.”

“He wants you gone,” added his father. “He thinks you’re too clingy. Too much. *Too broken.*”

Vox’s throat dried up. He took a step backwards, then another as agony filled his chest. He kept a hand over his crotch and brought the other to his stomach, attempting to hide some of the organs and mechanics that made him so ugly, and he hunched his shoulders, trying to make himself smaller, to stop his parents from seeing so much of him.

“I... I did nothing wrong,” Vox whispered. “I was trying to help him.”

“He doesn’t need you. He doesn’t want you. No one does,” growled his father as he stood and slowly advanced on Vox, and Vox stood frozen, helpless to defend himself in the face of his father’s disdain.

His eyes flicked to the belt. “I tried to be a good son to you,” he said quietly. “Even though you hated me. I just wanted what the other kids had. I wanted you to tuck me in at night and read me stories. I wanted you to put my drawings on the fridge. I wanted you to walk me to school. I wanted you to talk to me without yelling at me...”

His father straightened the belt and Vox felt a tear track down his cheek. “I just wanted you to love me.”

The belt struck his side hard and Vox whimpered and cowered from his father like he had so many decades ago. “You didn’t even try,” Vox choked out. “The other kids knew what you thought of me. They made fun of me for it. Said there was something wrong with me.”

“They were right,” growled his father before he dealt a second blow, the leather biting painfully into Vox’s skin.

Tears of agony trickled down Vox's screen but he didn't dare lift his hands to defend himself. He didn't want his parents to see his gruesome body.

"You could have pretended to love me," Vox whispered.

"Why make the effort?" his mother asked coldly and the belt drew blood on the third strike.

Vox doubled over. "I'm sorry," he whimpered.

His father snorted and hit him again and again until Vox was forced to his knees. He trembled against the force of the beating and finally raised a hand to protect his screen when the leather grazed his casing. He flinched when the belt bit into his palm.

"You will always be alone, Victor," rumbled his father. "No one will ever want you. No one will accept your perverted fetishes. No one will ever love you. You're worthless."

Vox huddled in on himself, lowering his head as his father continued to beat him.

It took him a few seconds to realise that he was alone again in the dark void of nothingness. He lifted his head slowly and looked around for his parents, frowning when he noticed they had vanished. He glanced down at his side, noting the bruises and blood marring his otherwise transparent skin. He opened his palm and watched blood trickle between the creases there.

He swallowed and stood, cradling his injured hand close to his body.

"Vox!"

He whirled around quickly, gathering a charge to defend himself and he remained quiet, peering through the darkness to find the source of the all-too-familiar voice.

“Vox!” shouted the voice again, this time from a different direction and Vox turned again, gritting his teeth.

“You’re not real,” Vox whispered below his breath.

“Vox, where are you? I... I can’t see you!” The tone was urgent, almost panicked, and Vox squeezed his eyes shut.

“Leave me alone!” he snarled.

There was a pause and Vox held his breath.

“...Vox, please! This isn’t a trick! I... I can’t find you. I can’t see you.”

Vox shook his head and backed away from the filtered voice. “He’s not real. He isn’t here,” he muttered to himself.

“I *am* here!” insisted Alastor’s voice, sounding frustrated. There was a soft growl followed by a sigh. “I’m sorry, Vox. I was possessed. I... I couldn’t fight her.”

Vox fell silent, eyes widening. *No. No, this had to be another trick...*

“I would never betray you like that,” Alastor said, tone hinting on distress. “Please believe me. I meant what I said about loving you. I love you, Vox. I promise I do.”

Vox’s breaths shook and electricity bounced between his antennae. “You’re lying. You... You aren’t real. You’re not really here.”

“I am.”

Vox startled and turned to find Alastor staring at him from a mere few feet away, smile strained and gaze brimming with upset.

“I’m here, Vox,” Alastor whispered and Vox trembled before shaking his head angrily.

“You can’t be. I don’t believe you.”

Alastor’s gaze flicked over his body and Vox caught the tiny grimace that passed over his expression before he tried to hide it with a reassuring smile that fell flat.

“I begged her to take me too. I couldn’t leave you here.”

Vox found himself covering his body with his hands in an effort to make Alastor feel more comfortable even as he scowled.

“You said you were tired of me,” he attempted to growl, but his voice cracked half way through.

Alastor’s ears lowered. “She made me say that. I promise you, Vox, I would never tire of you.” His gaze tracked down Vox’s body again and his ears lowered a little further with discomfort. He quickly met Vox’s eyes again and Vox shrank in on himself a fraction more.

“You... You mean it?” he asked as hope fluttered desperately inside his chest. “...She really possessed you? Is she capable of that?”

“She’s capable of more than I imagined,” said Alastor grimly before he offered Vox a weak smile. “This is quite the mess we’re in.”

A sob left Vox's throat and he darted towards Alastor.

Alastor retreated a step, ears flat and expression clearly uncomfortable as he stared at Vox's body.

Vox froze and retracted his arms from where they had reached towards the Radio Demon.

"...I'm sorry," Vox whispered as bile crept up his throat. "I know I'm not exactly... pretty."

He had hoped Alastor would be different.

Alastor shook his head slowly. "No, Vox, I..." He trailed off, expression curling a little in distaste before he ironed it out with a false grin. "Don't be silly! Come here, darling."

He opened his arms in invitation and Vox sagged before latching onto Alastor desperately.

Alastor stiffened in clear revulsion.

Vox tore away from him, screen glitching with distress. "You're disgusted by me," he whispered.

"...No," Alastor said quietly, but there was a note of hesitation and Vox wrapped his arms around himself, electricity bouncing frantically between his antennae and over his frame.

"You feel sick just looking at me," he whimpered, pulse racing as his vision blurred and flickered with his rising anxiety.

Alastor swallowed thickly and couldn't quite meet Vox's gaze. "No... That isn't true."

“You can’t even fucking look at me!” Vox said hysterically as he staggered backwards and suddenly collapsed to his knees, chest heaving and stomach rolling over. If Alastor couldn’t stand the sight of his body, then no one could. Alastor was supposed to love him unconditionally, he was supposed to be different to Valentino and all the one-night stands. He wasn’t supposed to care what Vox looked like. He wasn’t supposed to look at Vox with such *distaste*.

“It’s just a little... unnatural,” Alastor said quietly and he didn’t try to approach Vox, didn’t try to comfort him or *touch him*. A whimper escaped Vox’s throat as he lowered his head in humiliation.

“I just wasn’t expecting you to look so...” Alastor trailed off with a grimace and Vox narrowed his eyes, tears streaking down his screen.

“Say it,” he hissed. “Go on!”

Alastor stared at him with a torn expression. “...So repulsive,” he whispered.

Vox bowed his head and trembled as silent sobs wracked his frame.

A hand rested upon his shoulder but Vox couldn’t bring himself to look up.

“It’s alright, Vox,” Alastor cooed. “I’ll get used to it.” Another hand trailed down the side of his boxy head, tender and gentle and Vox leaned into the warm palm desperately as Alastor peppered kisses over the top of his head.

“And if I can’t, then you can keep your clothes on.”

A choked sob left Vox’s throat.

“Or we could turn the lights off,” murmured Alastor in between kisses.

Vox wept harder.

“Perhaps I could wear a blindfold.”

Vox doubled over on himself, trying to make himself as small as possible to hide from Alastor’s disgusted gaze.

A hand petted his back. “Damn. You look even worse from this angle. Look at all those ugly ports mutilating your flesh...”

Vox snapped his gaze up at the amusement in Alastor’s tone and he bared his teeth at the Radio Demon’s smirk. He tore away from Alastor’s touch.

“You’re not him,” Vox spat.

Alastor laughed. “Of course not!” A laugh track rang out in the background. “You didn’t believe he’d try to *save* you, did you?”

Vox licked his lips, unwilling to admit how desperately he had hoped for Alastor to come rescue him.

The creature pretending to be Alastor laughed again. “Oh, you sweet, naive picturebox! He couldn’t wait to get rid of you! He didn’t hesitate to deliver you to that bookshop.” His grin widened. “You didn’t really think he was *possessed*, did you?”

Vox didn’t know what to believe anymore.

“My dear, there’s no escape. Alastor isn’t coming to save you. Alastor never wants to see you again! No one does. You have been well and truly abandoned in this place.” Alastor gestured around the darkness with a cheerful grin before he sneered at Vox. “You’re alone. Forever and always. No one can bear to be around you.”

Vox threw a hand out, discharging all of his electricity at Alastor, but the Radio Demon simply vanished with a haunting laugh.

Vox panted and looked around the empty void. He shuddered.

And then he curled into a tight ball and buried his face into his knees.

“Pity. I had higher hopes for you, little television. I didn’t expect you to fall at the first hurdle.”

Vox growled into his knees at the breathy voice.

“Leave me alone.”

“I can set you free.”

Vox kept his face pressed against his knees. “I’d rather die than make a deal with you.”

“They’ll keep coming back. Their taunts won’t stop unless you overcome your humiliation. I can make them go away.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

A belt cracked against his spine and Vox yelped and scrambled away, eyes widening as his mother and father advanced on him once more, Valentino and Alastor watching on with sadistic grins.

“I can help you, sweet television.”

Vox scrambled to his feet and backed away from his parents. “I won’t wear your chain,” Vox spat.

“Suit yourself.” She fell silent, but his parents raced towards him as Alastor and Valentino cackled in the background.

“Come here, you perverted freak,” hissed his father as he chased after Vox.

Vox dodged his outstretched hand and ran blindly into the darkness.

It could have been weeks or mere hours, Vox wasn’t sure. Time had no meaning in this place.

He was battered, screen tear-stained, and muscles aching from fighting. He shivered as Alastor reached into the gaping hole he had made in Vox’s stomach and pulled out another handful of components, inspecting each one with mild disdain.

“You’re more machine than person at this point,” Alastor hummed and Vox had long since given up replying.

He was sprawled over whatever counted as a floor in Purgatory, and he had stopped trying to resist whatever his parents or Valentino or Alastor decided to do to him. Occasionally, a vaguely familiar one-night stand would try their hand at calling him worthless and repulsive and he had stopped listening to them long before he had given up the fight against Alastor.

“Quite the monster,” continued Alastor cheerily as he slipped his hand inside Vox and watched in idle fascination as he squeezed the Television Demon’s duodenum. “How absolutely ghastly!”

“You should take his face apart next,” Valentino said, appearing suddenly beside Vox’s head. Vox rolled his eyes slowly to the moth-demon’s sneer. “Do you think he actually feels pain or do you think he just pretends so he can fit in?”

Alastor made a curious sound before suddenly tearing out a section of Vox’s intestine and studying his face.

Vox didn’t react. He had switched off his pain receptors when they had first taken an interest in ripping bits of him apart.

“I don’t think it feels anything,” drawled Alastor.

It.

Vox stared numbly into the darkness.

“Would you like to hear my proposal?” asked The Voice.

Vox closed his eyes in relief and nodded.

Alastor had visited the bookshop every day for the last three months, begging, pleading, snarling for The Voice to release Vox and every day he received the same response.

Silence.

She refused to talk to him.

He slid down one of the bookcases, pushing a hand through his hair as he squeezed his eyes shut. Beside him, his silhouette trembled in distress.

What if Vox was already dead?

His heart clenched and his stomach rolled and he suddenly dry heaved. His shadow rubbed his back.

An hour later, he left the bookshop and slowly shuffled home.

He froze at the sight of a familiar figure slipping into an empty alleyway. His heart raced and his silhouette turned to him with a shocked expression and Alastor dissolved into the shadows and quickly caught up to the Television Demon.

“Vox,” he choked out, relief heavy in his tone.

Vox stilled, back to Alastor.

Alastor’s smile widened, chest bursting with love and excitement. *Vox was alive! He had escaped!* “Are you alright?”

Vox flexed his fingers and didn’t respond and Alastor frowned worriedly. He took a step forward. “What happened?” he asked quietly. “How did you get out?”

Again, Vox remained silent and concern filled Alastor’s gaze. He reached for Vox’s shoulder.

Vox gripped his wrist and Alastor cried out in agony as Vox discharged thousands of volts through his frame. He attempted to tear his hand out of Vox's grasp but the Television Demon held fast, refusing to let up his attack. Finally, when Alastor pushed desperately at Vox's chest, the other demon threw him onto the floor with a hateful look.

Alastor stared up at him, dazed and smoking lightly. Every part of his body hurt.

"Touch me again and I'll tear out your heart with my bare hands," Vox growled and he looked *exhausted*.

Alastor blinked up at him with wide eyes before his ears flattened against his skull as he realised that Vox still believed that he had betrayed him willingly.

"Vox, that day, that wasn't me. I *never* would have-"

Vox's face contorted with anger and he pumped another load of electricity through Alastor's body. Alastor howled and summoned his shadows to drag Vox away from him. He panted, muscles twitching as he gazed at Vox with a wounded expression.

Vox glowered at him. "Touch me again," Vox repeated slowly, quietly, "and I'll rip out your heart like you ripped out mine."

Alastor froze and watched numbly as Vox turned away from him and stalked into the night.

His silhouette wrapped its arms around him and buried its face into his shoulder, weeping silently.

Warnings: This is a tough one for Vox! Brief discussion of suicide at the beginning, one homophobic slur, heavy themes of abandonment and child abuse throughout, body horror/gore in the second section.

You were all wondering how Vox turned into his canon self, well... here he is :)

Chapter 29: The Incy Wincy Spider

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Valentino's heart clenched as he brushed his fingers over Vox's desk. He glanced around the room, noting the little nick nacks and personal items that screamed *Vox* and he sighed and perched on the edge of the desk delicately.

No one had seen the Television Demon in three months. It was as though he had dropped off the face of Hell.

Guilt tugged at Valentino's chest as he remembered all the hurtful things he had last shouted at Vox. He wished he could apologise. He had been trying to run VoxTek in Vox's stead, but it was complicated to run parts of a company he didn't really understand and he knew there were things he had neglected - important things he couldn't make decisions on because he couldn't comprehend what he was reading. Still, he tried his best to keep Vox's company together in his absence.

And who knew when he would return?

He rubbed at his arm and picked up one of Vox's favourite pens. It was shaped like a shark and a smile tugged at Valentino's lips as he ran his thumb along its tail.

The door flung open.

Valentino held his breath at the expression on Vox's face. He looked drained. Miserable. *Angry*.

"Vox," Valentino choked out as he replaced the pen in its container and slid off the desk. "You're back."

Vox gave him a cold look. “Thanks for noticing. What are you doing in my office?”

Valentino had a hard time scraping words together. “I...” His shoulders slumped. “I missed you.”

Vox hummed as though he didn’t believe Valentino, or perhaps didn’t care. Valentino grimaced. “Are you... alright?”

“Peachy,” Vox muttered as he approached the desk and scowled at the mountains of paperwork.

“Where have you been?” Valentino asked quietly, studying Vox’s face for a moment before noticing how tense his body was.

“My own personal Hell,” Vox said with a vicious smile and Valentino straightened at the look behind Vox’s eyes.

He didn’t recognise this man. This was not the Vox he remembered.

“I tried to keep this place running while you were gone. I didn’t understand some things.”

Vox curled his lip at a piece of paperwork. “I’m surprised *you* understood anything.”

Valentino flinched. He probably deserved that after everything he said three months ago. He bit his lip, worrying it between his teeth as Vox sank into the chair behind his desk.

“Vox, I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I should never have said such cruel things to you. Or to Rosie.”

Vox hummed absently - a clear dismissal.

Valentino flexed his fingers. "I'm sorry for lying to you. I got... scared."

Vox made a mocking sound of sympathy, not bothering to look at Valentino, and Valentino's lip wobbled before he whirled on his heel and marched towards the door.

He stilled before he reached it and squeezed his eyes shut, fear filling his stomach. He whipped around to face Vox again.

"That thing in the bookshop made me do it," he blurted, beginning to tremble. She could kill him for this. She could make it painful. She had told him not to reveal anything to Vox but he couldn't keep the secret anymore; not now that Vox had returned. Not after knowing how much lying to Vox had hurt him. He didn't want to keep hurting Vox, didn't want to keep lying to him.

If she tortured him, then at least Vox would know the truth.

Vox hesitated and Valentino ploughed on. "I confronted Alastor because she told me to threaten him. I didn't want to, I swear! And I only came to you that night because she told me where to find you - she told me what Alastor had done. She asked me to lie to you to keep you two apart, said she'd kill me if I didn't and I- I was so *afraid* because she'd already tortured me once and I didn't want to face that again, but following her orders isn't worth putting you through so much pain, and I'm *sorry*, Vox. I'm so fucking sorry."

Tears glazed his vision as he trembled. He hunched in on himself, waiting for the inevitable punishment.

Vox stared at him for a long moment. "As long as you didn't make a deal with her, she has no power outside the bookshop," he said quietly.

Valentino froze. "What?" he asked with dawning horror.

Vox searched his face for a moment before narrowing his eyes. “I could have told you that if you’d been truthful with me from the start.”

“I thought she would kill me!” Valentino hissed before his chest heaved and he pressed his back against the door to steady himself. “I didn’t need to do any of that,” he whispered to himself. “I should never have lied to you about Alastor. I shouldn’t have threatened him.” He gripped his arms tighter as his panic rose. “He invited me inside,” he whimpered. “He was trying to be *kind* to me and I... I...”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Vox said darkly. “He deserved everything you did to him.”

Valentino baulked. “You love him. How can you say that? I saw how desperate you were to save him.” Valentino shook his head angrily at himself. “I should have helped you. I knew he was on her chain. I knew what she was capable of. I... I should have helped you both, but I was a coward.”

Vox raked his gaze slowly over Valentino’s form and Valentino shifted uncomfortably at the strange look in his eyes. Everything about Vox felt... *off*.

“I shouldn’t have tried to drive you two apart,” Valentino continued guiltily. “And I certainly shouldn’t have run from you when you trusted me to take care of you,” Valentino said quietly. “I really am sorry, Vox. I wasn’t expecting you to look like that, but I shouldn’t have made you feel like shit. I should have stayed. I should have reassured you.”

Finally, something in Vox’s expression softened a fraction. He still didn’t look like the Television Demon Valentino recognised, but he was closer to it.

“Alastor betrayed me. He revealed that he was *bored* of me, tired of my clinginess, and he lured me into the bookshop and let her take me. That’s where I’ve been these past months,” Vox said coolly.

Fury welled inside Valentino and his wings flung out either side of him. “He *what?*”

Vox smiled bitterly. “Like I said: He deserved everything you did to him.”

“That evil piece of shit!” Valentino snarled before a thought niggled at him and he hesitated. “...Are you sure it was of his own volition? That thing might have threatened him.”

Vox slammed his fist on the desk, startling Valentino. “He let her take me!” Vox yelled. “Even if she threatened him, that means he didn’t hesitate to trade my life to save his own ass! You don’t do that to someone you love! Especially when you know that they’ll be tortured! I would *never* have put him through that, even to save myself!” Vox’s voice was thick with his filters and he shook his head angrily before fixing Valentino with a sharp look.

“It’s fine,” he said calmly, even as his face glitched. “I understand what he really thinks of me now.” He smiled strangely. “And I understand what you think of me too.”

Valentino frowned. “Vox-”

Vox held a hand up. “I get it. It’s okay, Val. You’re allowed to have opinions. My body’s a freak show, I know. I’ve come to accept that people will always be repulsed by it.”

“Vox-”

“But that doesn’t mean I can’t make you feel good,” purred Vox. “That doesn’t mean you can’t use me to fulfil some of your... wilder fantasies.” He stood and stalked around the desk. “I can turn off my pain receptors. You can be as rough as you like. You can hurt me as much as you want. And having a biomechanical system means I have replaceable parts. You can rip out entire pieces of me and I’ll have a back-up. I might be a monster, more machine than person, but that only means you can do *more* with me.”

Valentino stiffened in alarm as Vox halted in front of him and slid a hand suggestively up his chest.

“Why would I want to hurt you?” Valentino whispered, antennae drooping in horror. “That is the *last* thing I want to do to you.”

Vox’s expression hardened. “Could have fooled me.” And then he gripped Valentino’s jaw painfully tight and dragged him into a deep, demanding kiss.

Valentino shoved at him and Vox stumbled away with a frustrated growl.

“What is wrong with you?” Valentino snapped, wiping his mouth, and Vox flinched before glowering at the moth-demon.

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it? For me to want you? For me to choose you over Alastor?” He threw his arms out. “Well, here I am! Do you want me to get on my knees? Do you want me to beg to suck your cock?” He dropped to his knees and Valentino watched on in horror before sinking in front of Vox and cupping his face between both hands.

Vox glowered at him, fury and hurt and bitterness swirling behind his digital eyes.

“What did she do to you?” Valentino asked softly, grief filling his chest. This wasn’t the Vox he knew.

Vox’s expression broke for a second before he shoved at Valentino’s chest. “Get off me,” he bit out before standing and straightening out his coat. “I thought this was your *thing*? Fucking people without hesitation? It’s what you do, isn’t it?”

Valentino recoiled, expression wounded. “Is that all you see me as?” he asked. “A whore?”

Vox shrugged. “I guess. Do you have any other talents?”

Valentino leapt to his feet, fists clenched. “What did she do to you?” he demanded. “Because this?” He gestured up and down Vox’s body. “This isn’t you. You aren’t this cruel.”

Vox smirked. “She just showed me a few home truths.” He prowled back to his desk. “She reminded me of what I’m capable of.” He dropped gracefully into his chair and smoothed his palms over his paperwork before fixing Valentino with a hypnotic stare.

“Come here, Valentino,” he purred and Valentino was helpless to resist the pull of that swirling left eye and Vox’s soft, coaxing voice.

“Sit in my lap,” Vox suggested and Valentino did.

“Kiss me,” Vox said gently and Valentino managed to fight the command for a few seconds before finally giving in and treating Vox to an uncomfortable, closed-mouth kiss.

Vox pushed them apart an inch, his eye returning to normal and his smile sharp.

“See, I can make people do whatever I want,” he whispered, lips brushing Valentino’s with every syllable as the moth-demon tensed on his lap. “The problem with trusting people is that they *lie*. Like you lied. Like Alastor lied. But if I’m controlling them, then they can’t lie, can they?”

He pulled back with a grin. “And why stop there? With the help of television, I can control *thousands* of people. I could become the most powerful Overlord in the Pride Ring.”

Valentino gripped Vox’s shoulders. “This isn’t you,” he whispered, distraught.

Vox pushed Valentino against the desk harshly, trapping him against it. “I’ve learned from my mistakes,” he growled. “Choose whether you want to stay by my side or fight against me.”

Valentino scowled at him. “Even without the threat, you know I will always choose to stay by your side. You know how I feel about you, amorcito.”

Vox released him, cold expression easing a little. “Good choice,” he muttered. “Now, if you don’t want to fuck me, get out. I’ve got work to do.”

Valentino flinched before carefully reaching out to cup the side of Vox’s head. Vox stiffened.

“I’m sorry, Vox. I never meant for you to feel like this,” Valentino whispered. “I never meant to hurt you like this.” He brushed his thumb tenderly over Vox’s cheek. “Tell me how to fix it.”

Vox glared at him but there was something vulnerable behind his eyes. “I don’t need your pity.”

Valentino carefully slid into Vox's lap once more and smoothed his lower pair of hands over Vox’s sides as his free upper hand rubbed the knots out of Vox’s shoulder.

“I don’t pity you,” Valentino breathed. “You’re hurting. I want to fix it.”

Finally, *finally*, Vox leaned into Valentino’s touch, eyes sliding shut.

“Tell me what she did to you so I can make it better,” Valentino murmured.

Vox shook his head.

Valentino frowned. If Vox wouldn’t tell him what had happened, then Valentino could at least try to rectify his last mistake.

“You don’t need to hypnotise me to get me to kiss you, cariño.” He peppered tender kisses over Vox’s cheek, brushing his fingers over Vox’s throat and down his chest before tucking his face into the Television Demon’s neck and kissing him there as well as he continued to ease the tension from Vox’s tight shoulders.

Vox didn't touch him in return and he kept his eyes closed, so Valentino carefully peeled him out of his coat and slid his lower pair of hands beneath Vox's sweater and over hot skin.

Vox frowned and guilt flashed across his expression. He finally looked at Valentino.

"Val, stop. You don't have to-"

Valentino smiled and kissed his mouth sweetly. "I want to."

Vox blinked and fell quiet and Valentino took his time kissing Vox's screen and antennae and sliding his palms over navy skin with its many circuit tracks and scars.

"I missed you," Valentino whispered against his lips. "I worried about you. I went to Rosie about you. I even showed up at Alastor's radio station to see if he knew anything. He wouldn't answer me." Valentino scowled. "Although now I know why."

Vox softened and finally traced his fingers down Valentino's cheek with a pained look. "Please don't talk about him." He trailed his fingers along Valentino's jaw. "You were really that worried about me?"

Valentino smiled and nodded before tapping the side of Vox's head. "Hypnotise me if you like. Ask me to tell you the truth."

It caught him off guard when Vox actually did hypnotise him. "Tell the truth. Did you really go to Rosie and Alastor because you were concerned about me?"

"Yes," Valentino replied, entranced by Vox's spiralling eye. "Alastor wouldn't talk. Rosie said she hadn't seen you before she kicked me out. She was furious at me for how I treated you. I'm angry with myself, too."

“You regret that night?” Vox asked quietly. “You regret leaving me?”

“Yes,” Valentino whispered. “Every day.”

Vox’s eye stopped swirling and he shrank in on himself, looking so incredibly hurt that Valentino felt sick at having caused the expression.

“I’m sorry,” Valentino breathed and he could have cried with relief when Vox’s fingers curled into his coat and tugged him closer.

“Prove it,” Vox whispered desperately.

This was the Vox that Valentino recognised. Soft and sweet and gentle in such quiet moments.

Valentino’s wings stretched either side of him in a possessive gesture and he kissed Vox hard and hungrily. Vox clutched at him, hands roaming over his back, exploring, mapping out every dip and rise as Valentino pressed closer to Vox.

“Take this off,” Valentino demanded against his mouth as he tugged at Vox’s sweater. “I want to see you.”

Vox hesitated. “...Val, I don’t think-”

“Take it off, mi amor. Let me look at you. Let me worship you.”

Vox shook his head slowly. “I... I don’t want-”

“Let me see how beautiful you are,” Valentino purred, nipping Vox’s lip, and with a shaky sigh, Vox removed his turtleneck. Valentino pulled back to admire him.

And couldn't stifle his grimace quickly enough.

Vox's expression hardened.

"Get off."

Valentino shook his head quickly. "I'm sorry! Vox, I didn't mean it! I swear!"

Vox gritted his teeth and pressed a red light at his hip and his skin became translucent, revealing the inner workings of his entire body.

Valentino looked away in disgust, then winced at himself.

"Get out," Vox growled.

"Hypnotise me," Valentino said softly. "Make me ignore it. Make me want to touch you."

"No," Vox said before pushing at Valentino's chest. "Get off me."

"I want you!" Valentino said desperately, snapping his gaze to Vox's face. "I really do! But I can't... I can't get past the..."

"Can't get past the fact that I'm a freak?" Vox spat and Valentino shook his head.

"That isn't true!" he hissed. "I just..." He risked a glance down at Vox's body and felt nauseous at the sight of his intestine gently pumping contents through his digestive tract. He squeezed his eyes shut. "Please, Vox. Hypnotise me and I can give you anything you want."

We can work around this if we try.” He swallowed and opened his eyes again, staring pleadingly at Vox’s scowling expression. “I love you. I promise I love you. I want to be able to touch you. I want to treat you right, but I can’t help my body’s reaction. So hypnotise me.”

Vox’s mouth drew into a thin line before his eye began its hypnotic swirling. “Your eyes are tricking you. My body is normal. Human. Touch me and you’ll feel unblemished flesh, soft and navy-coloured to match my screen. Touch me and you won’t feel any scars or tracks - my skin is smooth, exactly as you’d expect.”

Valentino grazed his fingers over Vox’s chest, finding it smooth and hairless. He leaned down to kiss a hard pectoral, gaze fixed on Vox’s eye.

“There are no vents at my ribs, nor any ports at my back. No lights anywhere on my body,” Vox said, subdued. “Your eyes are trying to deceive you so keep them on my screen. My body feels exactly as you’d expect a human to feel. The only difference is the colour of my skin.”

Valentino kept his gaze on Vox’s face as he trailed kisses over the Television Demon’s unblemished chest and down to his stomach. There was a light trail of hair leading to his waistband, as he expected, and Valentino nuzzled at it before mouthing at the soft flesh of his stomach and working a small bruise into it.

Vox began to relax.

“You’re gorgeous,” Valentino said, unable to tear his gaze away from Vox’s hypnotic eye even though he was in full control of his words and actions. He slid his hands around Vox’s ribs before moving up his body to suck at a perky nipple.

Vox made a strange face and shifted slightly and Valentino heard a set of fans speed up. Vox caught Valentino’s wrists and shifted his palms a couple of inches lower before releasing him again.

Valentino swirled his tongue around a nipple and Vox raised an eyebrow when Valentino took the little nub between his teeth. He seemed rather unaffected by the display, so Valentino

quickly abandoned the nipple, unaware that he had been mouthing thin air and that Vox had short, flat LED strips in place of conventional nipples.

Valentino travelled lower, hands trailing to Vox's hips, and Vox suddenly gasped and grew a little warmer. Valentino smirked but the expression dimmed when Vox quickly tapped his own hip and blew out a relieved breath.

"What did I...?" Valentino trailed off quietly.

Vox's voice softened. "You closed my vents." He tentatively touched Valentino's cheek when the moth-demon grimaced. "It's alright. We'll get better at this."

Valentino brightened. "Does that mean...?"

Vox managed a weak smile. "I can see you're being sincere. If you're willing to try, then so am I."

Valentino beamed and surged upwards to kiss Vox. Vox lapped inside his mouth with a chuckle and after a moment's hesitation, Valentino opened up and let Vox taste his venomous tongue. Vox wrapped his arms around him and kissed him a little more passionately, but other than that, nothing much else changed and Valentino squeaked happily.

It was good to not have someone desperately trying to jump him the moment they tasted his saliva.

Vox rubbed his back soothingly and Valentino grinned against his mouth before closing his eyes and giving Vox a chance to rest his hypnotic gaze. Beneath his palms, he could feel the tracks engraved into Vox's skin, but as long as he had his eyes closed, it didn't seem so bad. He could pretend they were scars. He'd always had a thing for scars.

Curious, he smoothed his palm over the tracks and noticed that Vox didn't actually have any hair at all on his stomach. He traced the tracks back up to Vox's chest, then raised his

eyebrows at Vox's flat nipples. His cheeks flushed red.

Vox smiled in amusement against his mouth.

He slipped a hand behind Vox, following the tracks over his back and towards his spine.

"Stop," Vox whispered and Valentino froze.

"Why?" he breathed, eyes squeezed shut.

"There are ports near my spine. You won't like them." He gently retrieved Valentino's hand and laid it over his stomach. "Stay away from my ribs and back."

He felt Vox reach for his own hip and had a feeling his skin had become opaque once more, hiding his inner workings.

"I'll get used to them," Valentino murmured and when he tried to open his eyes, Vox laid his palms over them.

"You won't," Vox said tiredly. "Keep your eyes closed or let me hypnotise you."

Valentino frowned before trailing his hands down Vox's sides and to his hips once more.

Vox huffed out a laugh and Valentino found himself smiling. "What?"

"Move your left hand down one inch."

“Why?”

Vox waited for Valentino to move the hand before removing his palms from Valentino’s eyes and kissing the top of his head. “Because you nearly rebooted me.”

Valentino barked out a laugh. “You need to rethink your button placement, amorcito.”

“Should I show you my mute button?” Vox teased and Valentino grinned.

“You do *not* have a mute button.”

“I do! I can get a little... loud during sex. I cap out my speakers sometimes. My partners were complaining it hurt their ears.”

Valentino kept his eyes shut and nuzzled into Vox’s neck. “Show me, mi amor.”

Vox took his hand and pressed a certain spot on his right hip. “This brings up the volume options and they rotate around that centre button. You can turn me up, turn me down, or mute me entirely.”

Valentino opened one eye and pressed the button that showed a speaker with a line through it.

Vox fell silent.

Valentino laughed. “Oh, I could get used to this,” he purred, closing his eye again and peppering kisses over Vox’s chest. He felt Vox reach for the button and he caught his wrist. “Ah ah ah! You’re going to sit there in silence and look pretty while I suck your cock.”

Vox inhaled sharply and Valentino trailed his tongue down Vox's muscled abdomen and began unzipping his trousers. He sank to the floor and traced his fingers over Vox's half mast cock as he dragged his trousers down to his ankles and there was a faint blue glow in front of his eyelids, so he dared to open them.

Vox tensed.

Valentino's eyes widened at Vox's dimly glowing cock. He smirked. "How pretty."

Vox relaxed.

Valentino suddenly wrapped his lips around Vox's cock and the Television Demon's eyes blew wide. Valentino met his gaze with an impish grin, resolutely ignoring the rest of his body and Vox's mouth opened before his head tipped back a little and his eyes fluttered closed. A silent groan left his lips as Valentino flicked his tongue over his rapidly hardening cock.

Vox tore his hand from Valentino's grip and unmuted himself. "Fuck me," he begged. "Please, Val. I want... I just need..."

Valentino pressed a tender kiss to the head of his cock. "Tell me what you need."

"...I need you to hold me close," Vox whimpered.

Valentino's heart broke. "I can do that," he whispered and he picked Vox up and flipped their positions, taking Vox's chair as he seated the Television Demon in his lap.

Vox reached blindly for a desk drawer and pulled out a small tube of lubricant.

Valentino laughed as Vox's screen tinged red. "You sly minx! Who else have you had up here?"

Vox muttered something beneath his breath and rubbed the back of his neck before frowning and kissing Valentino hard on the mouth. “Shut up and put your dick in me, bastard.”

Valentino grinned and gripped Vox’s hips hard. “With pleasure,” he purred as he unzipped himself and quickly prepared Vox.

He squeezed Vox’s hips and seated him on his cock and suddenly, Vox slumped forwards, screen dark and body limp.

Valentino straightened in alarm. “...Vox?” He shook the other demon a little but Vox didn’t respond. “Vox!”

He cupped Vox’s screen and tapped it but the man’s face remained offline, so Valentino panicked and lay him gently on the floor, hands hovering over the dimly glowing lights at his hips. What had he pressed? What had he done wrong?

A moment later, Vox’s screen flashed with colour bars before his face faded into view and he touched his head delicately with a groan.

Valentino blew out a breath of relief.

“Well, that was a mood killer,” grumbled Vox. “Nothing like a soft reboot to soften your dick.”

Valentino plopped onto his ass and drew his knees to his chest. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Vox sighed. “Not your fault.” He managed a small smile and opened his arms in invitation.

Valentino eyed the lights at his hips warily and stayed put. He didn't want to accidentally damage Vox.

Vox's smile faded and his arms fell to his sides. "Right," he muttered. "That's fine." He stood and collected his clothes. "Well, this is familiar, isn't it?" he asked coldly and Valentino startled and leapt to his feet.

"Now hold on a second, Voxy-"

"I've got work to do. Get out," Vox commanded and Valentino frowned.

"That's not fair. Let me try again-"

"Get out," snarled Vox, eye swirling hypnotically and Valentino was powerless to resist. He left Vox's office without protest and flinched when Vox slammed the door behind him.

A couple of days later saw Vox hunched stiffly over his desk, brows furrowed in concentration and fingers flexing as cramp threatened to take control of his hand.

Valentino slithered up behind him silently and massaged his shoulders, and Vox sagged and leaned into him, eyes sliding shut in relief.

Valentino gently pressed his head against the back of Vox's casing. "Let me try again," he whispered and his lower set of arms wound around Vox's middle.

Vox laced their fingers together and sighed in defeat.

"Okay."

They learned what worked and what didn't. Blindfolds and hypnosis were mostly effective, providing Vox kept a close eye on where Valentino's hands were wandering to. He could move his buttons to different parts of his body and it seemed that they were less likely to be involved in incidents when they were on Vox's back, since Valentino never ventured near his ports.

The issue with hypnosis was that it was draining to Vox, and neither of them could look away from each other's eyes lest the trance be severed.

Eventually, Valentino grew accustomed to Vox's opaque skin and all of its tracks. He even got used to the vents, but the moment Vox's skin became translucent, Valentino was swallowing his own nausea.

Sex was... complicated, but not in the way that Valentino had expected.

Vox was up for anything and everything, but he was distant. He touched Valentino in all the right ways, moaned in all the right places, said all the right things, and they explored a lot of kinks together, but it was as though Vox was merely going through the motions. Everything he did felt scripted, calculated, and Valentino couldn't quite pinpoint why or how to get Vox more emotionally invested in him.

Honestly, it was like fucking a robot.

One that had been programmed to bring people pleasure, but a robot nonetheless.

Valentino panted as he rolled off Vox and he watched unhappily as Vox reached for his phone and began typing out emails without a single glance back at him.

He turned his back to Vox and curled in on himself with a scowl. He felt like a cheap whore.

He slid out of bed to clean up and Vox didn't bother speaking to him, so Valentino gritted his teeth and stalked into the bathroom. Nothing he did seemed to catch Vox's attention. Sure, Vox *pretended* to care about him, but as the weeks passed, it became abundantly clear that there was no intensity or true passion between them. Vox felt no love for Valentino.

The Television Demon had *changed*.

That night, Valentino headed to the bar to clear his head with some expensive alcohol. He was halfway through his third glass of sherry when a vaguely familiar and very pretty spider-demon perched on the stool beside him with a sultry smile and half-lidded eyes.

"What's a gorgeous thing like you doing sitting here all alone?" purred the spider-demon.

Valentino cocked an eyebrow, trying to remember where he had seen the man before. He really was a lovely creature - with long legs and soft-looking fluff. Prettier than some of the girls that worked in his studio...

"Oh, I remember you," drawled Valentino as he returned his attention to his drink. "You're the crackhead. Where's your one-eyed friend?"

"Probably blowing shit up," said the spider-demon with a shrug and he didn't seem at all offended to be referred to as a 'crackhead'. "Valentino, right? You're the guy with the drugged saliva."

Valentino's mouth drew into a thin line and he set his drink down on the bar top. So that was what this was about.

"I don't do that shit anymore," he muttered. "Find your next high somewhere else."

“I can pay,” purred the spider-demon and he trailed a long finger down Valentino’s arm. “In more ways than one.”

Valentino jerked away from him with a growl. “I have a boyfriend.” Barely. One that was emotionally unavailable. One that he didn’t matter to.

“Fine,” huffed the spider-demon. “But I can actually pay. Like, with real money.”

“Get lost,” snorted Valentino as he downed the rest of his drink and stood.

He bristled when a hand gripped his shoulder and he whirled on the other demon with a snarl.

“Look, buddy,” hissed the other demon. “Are you going to give me what I want or are things going to have to get messy?”

From the corner of his eye, Valentino caught the flash of a gun and he gripped the spider-demon’s wrists at lightning speed, flaring his wings wide to startle him. He shoved the spider-demon against the bar, earning a couple of complaints from surrounding patrons.

“What’s your name?” Valentino asked lowly and the spider-demon frowned.

“Angel Dust.”

Valentino curled his lip in disdain. “Stop chasing meaningless highs and make something of yourself before you threaten the wrong Overlord.”

Angel blinked before scowling and Valentino felt something cool and metallic press against his stomach. He glanced down to see a third set of arms that Angel hadn’t had a few seconds previous. The gun had been passed into one of these hands and was now flush with Valentino’s stomach.

Angel smirked. "Thanks for the life advice."

Valentino smiled and suddenly kissed Angel, forcing his tongue between his lips. It was enough of a distraction for Valentino to tear the gun from Angel's grip and wedge it under his jaw. He pulled away with narrowed eyes. "Checkmate."

Angel blinked twice, looking a little dazed for a moment before the drug wore off and he struggled against Valentino with a growl. "Let me go." His gaze darted over Valentino's shoulder.

Valentino noticed the finger-shaped bruises around his throat.

He paused and dragged his gaze carefully over Angel as the spider-demon scowled at him. There was a bruise around the left wrist of his second set of hands and a large bruise on his right thigh.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer," snarled Angel and Valentino caught his gaze, watching his own life playing behind Angel's eyes.

His shoulders sagged a fraction. "You should leave him," Valentino said softly. "He doesn't love you."

Angel's eyes widened before he bared his teeth. "Fuck you." His gaze darted over Valentino's shoulder again.

"If he loved you, he wouldn't hurt you," Valentino said quietly as he eased his grip on the spider-demon. Angel frowned at him then glanced past him.

"You don't know anything," he growled.

Valentino smiled weakly. "I know how hard it is to escape."

Angel fell quiet and Valentino didn't dare look over his shoulder because he had a feeling he already knew what he would find.

"He either won't care that you're trying to make him jealous, or he'll hurt you more for it."

Angel frowned and opened his mouth then promptly snapped it shut again.

"I can get you out of here, if you like?" Valentino asked carefully. "I can take you somewhere safe? Away from him."

Angel's eyes widened and he glanced over Valentino's shoulder again before he swallowed. "Drag me towards the bathroom. There's an emergency exit on your left, just before you reach it."

"The front door is closer," Valentino murmured. "And it leads onto the main street. It'll be easier to disappear into the crowd." He peeled Angel off the bar but startled when Angel gripped his wrist tightly.

"This isn't what you think it is," Angel hissed before he pulled a face and shook his head. "Well, it partly is, but I'm not... it's not *me* who's in the most danger right now. I'm just the bait."

Confusion graced Valentino's features for a moment before his eyes widened and he began to turn. Angel tugged him closer.

"Don't look," he growled. "They'll know something's up. They're near the front door."

"They want my saliva?" Valentino asked, scowling and Angel gave him a sharp look.

“They want your *power*. You’re a damn Overlord, Valentino, and you’re sitting alone at a bar looking miserable and distracted. We’ve been planning to kill you for the last half hour.”

We.

“What changed your mind?” Valentino asked quietly.

Angel suddenly forced a flirtatious smile and curled his fingers in Valentino’s coat as he pressed himself flush with the moth-demon. “You’re not the sleazy shithead I thought you were,” Angel hissed through clenched teeth. “Now kiss me and drag me towards the back door before you lose your head-start.”

Valentino blinked then pulled Angel in for a closed-mouth kiss before Angel practically hauled him towards the back door. The moment they stumbled outside, Angel grabbed his wrist and broke into a sprint and Valentino heard more people spill out of the bar and chase after them with angry shouts.

A gunshot rang out and Angel dragged him behind a dumpster, chest heaving and eyes wide as a group of three male demons and one female demon raced past them.

Angel hauled him upright again and sprinted through the alley before vaulting elegantly over a tall wall. He popped up to offer his hand to Valentino and the moth-demon smirked and vaulted the wall by himself.

Angel grinned in amusement before performing a graceful somersault into someone’s backyard and Valentino copied the movement with ease, ending with a little curtsy and earning a stifled snicker from Angel.

They ran and leapt over whatever obstacles got in their way, and their escape turned into something of a game, competing over who had the best gymnastic skills in an increasingly theatrical manner until Valentino eventually spread his wings and plucked Angel off the ground with a triumphant grin.

Angel tossed his head back in a laugh as Valentino deposited him on top of a run-down hotel near the centre of the city.

“Cheater,” Angel said as he perched on the edge of the roof and kicked his feet as he glanced over the twinkling city lights.

Valentino plopped beside him and leaned back on his hands, chest heaving. He hadn’t had that much fun in a long time.

“So, your boyfriend beats you too, huh?” Angel asked after a few minutes.

Valentino glanced at him. “Vox? No. He’s a little distant, but he doesn’t beat me. The guy I was with on Earth though... He was a real piece of work. He’s the whole reason I died. Ended up in prison because of him. Because he used me as a scapegoat.”

Angel pulled a sympathetic face before he dropped his gaze to his lap. “I tried to leave a little while ago but, uh... he found me. Him and his friends. They... took turns teaching me a lesson.”

Valentino’s antennae drooped. He knew that feeling. Knew that humiliation.

He licked his lips. “I can give you a place to stay, if you want it? The studio I work at has a couple of spare bedrooms. It’s secure. Vox is a stickler for security.”

Angel blinked. “I just admitted to plotting to kill you. Why are you being so nice to me?”

Valentino shrugged. “You remind me of myself. I wish someone had offered to help me.”

Shock swept across Angel's expression before he suddenly swung into Valentino's lap and kissed him heatedly, swallowing Valentino's muffled sound of alarm.

Valentino managed to tear Angel away from him, eyes round. "What the fuck was that?" he asked incredulously and Angel grimaced and ran a hand through his windswept hair.

"Sorry! I... I just... It's been so long since anyone's been nice to me and I... I'm tired of feeling worthless. Like I don't *matter* to anyone. And you... you've been so understanding from the start and I had *fun* escaping with you and-" He cut himself off and let his face fall into his hands with a groan. "I'm such a damn mess."

Valentino's chest tightened and he rubbed Angel's back instinctively. He was in a complicated, abusive relationship and he was a drug addict and he was definitely a mess, but he was soft and he felt far too many feelings and his smile was contagious.

And he wanted Valentino for something other than his body or saliva. He wanted *company*. He wanted comfort. Valentino wanted those things too.

Was it even considered cheating if your boyfriend didn't actually love you?

Valentino licked his lips, torn, before gently tilting Angel's chin up and smiling at the spider-demon's huge eyes.

"Tell me how you like to be touched, amorcito," he whispered and Angel froze before snaking his arms around Valentino and kissing him deeply, *desperately*.

It was just one night.

Vox would never find out.

Angel Dust enters the chat...

Chapter 30: A Liar, A Thief, And A Cheat

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

One night turned into two, two into ten, and soon, Valentino was sneaking into Angel Dust's room whenever Vox gave him the cold shoulder, or after a tough day, or whenever he wanted to just *talk*.

Angel was addicting and refreshing and his smile was genuine whenever Valentino walked into the room.

For once in his miserable existence, Valentino felt as though he *mattered* to someone.

He could be himself around Angel and for the first time, he was the one with the most power in the relationship - the one protecting his partner in the way that he wished his previous partners had protected him.

Naturally, Angel's lover and his goons came looking for him, but they made the mistake of approaching VoxTek studios, and Valentino's guns combined with Vox's new security measures ensured that Angel would be left alone.

Angel showed his gratitude by tugging Valentino into bed and worshipping every inch of his body.

It was bliss for three months.

Of course, it couldn't last.

Eventually, Valentino offered Angel a job at the studio - he was uneasy at the thought of the spider-demon standing on street corners, offering his body to dangerous people in exchange for cash, and perhaps he was a little jealous of the idea of others touching Angel, angry at the idea of them *hurting* him for their own twisted pleasure.

So he offered Angel a role - strip teasing, dancing, recording private shows... the sort of soft porn that kept Angel safe and out of other people's beds. Angel snapped up the offer immediately.

At first, Valentino had been worried that Angel would use the extra income on drugs - not that he particularly cared about people doing drugs, but he enjoyed Angel's company and he preferred him sober and not too high to have forgotten their time together. However, it seemed that Angel also valued their time together and Valentino was surprised by how willing Angel was to reduce his usage.

Valentino suddenly felt important. He felt *wanted*.

A guttural groan fell from Angel's throat as he clutched at the sheets.

"Harder," he growled and Valentino peppered kisses along his spine as he gripped Angel's hips with one set of hands and thrust into him roughly, using his lower set of hands to squeeze his cock and throat.

Angel's eyes fluttered shut as Valentino mouthed at his shoulder, working a small bruise into it.

"You should fuck me like this on camera," Angel panted. "You'd get great ratings."

Valentino nipped his shoulder and Angel whined deliciously and arched up into him.

“I don’t want anyone else seeing you like this,” Valentino whispered. “This is just for us, amorcito.”

Angel grinned. “I love it when you get possessive over me.” He turned his head slightly and Valentino kissed him deeply. When they pulled apart, Angel nipped his lip and heat flared in Valentino’s belly.

“You should ask Vox to join us,” Angel whispered. “Might give him a little stress relief. He’s been looking tense recently.”

Valentino was careful not to grimace.

He might have told Angel that he and Vox were in an open relationship.

To be honest, Valentino wasn’t sure what sort of relationship he and Vox were in. Sex was awkward, conversations were limited, Vox was overworked, and nothing Valentino said or did was good enough to hold his attention. Valentino wasn’t sure if they were even *friends* anymore. Vox was always so cold nowadays. Distant.

And then there was the issue of Vox’s strange body. Valentino didn’t want to expose Angel to that - it would only make him uncomfortable. Nauseous, like it made Valentino.

“He has rules,” Valentino lied. “He doesn’t like us sharing partners.”

Angel shrugged a shoulder in acceptance before kissing Valentino heatedly and sliding their tongues together. Angel hummed against his mouth and Valentino melted against him, pleased when Angel’s only reaction to his saliva was to kiss him deeper.

“What the fuck is this?”

Valentino's blood turned to ice and he tore away from Angel to stare at a very livid Vox. Beside him, Angel looked between them both curiously.

"V-Vox," Valentino stuttered, throat dry as Vox's expression grew darker. "What are you doing down here?" He quickly covered himself with the bed sheet.

Vox smiled sharply, like a shark about to take a bite out of an unsuspecting surfer. "I was about to ask you out to lunch."

"How about you come join us and I'll treat us all to lunch?" Angel purred, wiggling his eyebrows, and Vox sent him a withering look that had his expression pinching into one of confusion.

"So, what? Is *this* why you hired him?" Vox hissed at Valentino. "So it would be easier to fuck him behind my back?"

Angel stiffened and snapped his wide gaze to Valentino and Valentino flinched. "It isn't... It isn't like that. He was in a bad position. I offered him a room and a job to help him--"

"Oh, I'm sure you've seen him in plenty of *positions*," growled Vox and Angel scowled at Valentino.

"Wait, you said he was okay with us."

Valentino glanced between them both, words dying on his tongue and bile rising up his throat. "I... I didn't mean... I just wanted..."

Vox held his hands up and for the first time in *months*, Valentino saw grief and distress dancing in Vox's gaze. "Fine. Whatever. Fuck your little whore, I don't give a damn. I'm the idiot for thinking I meant something to you." Vox shook his head angrily. "Even though you've given me *countless* clues to the contrary."

He turned away. “Maybe next time you’re having an affair, lock the fucking door,” he growled.

Fury suddenly boiled over inside Valentino’s gut and he shot out of bed, uncaring that he was naked.

“*You’re* the idiot?” he asked with an incredulous laugh. “I’m the one trying to hold this relationship together! I’m the one putting in all the effort! I’m the one who keeps coming back over and over even though you treat me like shit! Nothing I do is good enough for you! Talking to you is like talking to a damn toaster!”

Vox froze by the door before whirling around and baring his teeth at Valentino.

“What do you expect, Valentino? Do you want me to worship the ground you walk on when you can’t even look at me shirtless without throwing up? I have to blindfold you or hypnotise you just to get you to *touch* me.” Vox’s shoulders sagged even as his expression remained hard. “How am I supposed to feel about that?”

Valentino scowled. “I’m trying, Vox. You don’t make it easy when you’re so cold with me.”

Vox’s mouth drew into a thin line as he gestured to Angel. “Is this you *trying*?”

Valentino fell silent, guilt filling his chest. “You act like I don’t matter to you,” he said quietly. “Angel makes me feel... wanted.”

Vox grinned viciously. “Then that’s both of our problems solved. You get Angel and I won’t have the humiliation of you looking at me like I’m some sort of circus *freak*. ” He stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

Valentino felt sick. He wasn't really the one at fault, was he? Vox had been emotionless for *months* - ever since he returned from the bookshop, or wherever that *thing* had taken him. He had changed. It wasn't Valentino's fault. Vox was the one who had been making things difficult between them. Vox was the stoic one. Passionless. *Bland*.

He couldn't blame Valentino for feeling uncomfortable at the sight of his body! Who in Hell would find *that* attractive? He could see Vox's *organs* through his skin. Honestly, anyone would feel a little nauseous - and Valentino had offered solutions like hypnosis and blindfolds! What more could Vox ask for? At least he was trying. Most would have dumped Vox on the spot, but not Valentino, because Valentino *cared* about Vox.

And, alright, perhaps he had messed up a little with Angel, but could anyone really blame him? Angel was pretty and full of feelings and he *valued* Valentino. He was everything that Vox wasn't. He gave Valentino things that Vox withheld. He didn't *reboot* every time Valentino grabbed his hips.

Angel was... everything he'd ever wanted.

...Perhaps Vox breaking things off with him wasn't a bad thing.

Angel threw his legs over the edge of the bed and began picking up his clothes with a frown. "Well, I'm out."

Valentino startled. "What?"

Angel pulled his clothes on. "You lied to me. You cheated on your boyfriend. You lied to him." Angel sent him a strained smile. "So, I'm out. It was fun while it lasted."

Ice settled in Valentino's veins for the second time that afternoon. "You... You can't just leave. I thought... I thought we had something special?"

Angel scowled at him. “So did I, but you’re apparently no better than my old clients who cheated on their partners each week. You told me you guys were in an open relationship. You lied to both of us.”

Valentino clenched his fists. “*You* came onto me! I told you I had a boyfriend and you kissed me anyway.”

Angel grimaced. “Yeah, well, we were both low and I had a moment of weakness.” His gaze hardened. “But I didn’t expect this to become a regular thing. I only slept with you afterwards because you told me Vox was cool with it. I trusted you.” He held his chin up. “And even that first time, I stopped. You were the one who pushed for more.”

He was quite correct. Valentino shouldn’t have pulled Angel back in...

Angel slid a hand through his hair, tussling it, before heading towards the door. “Anyway, this ain’t gonna work if I can’t trust you. I’ve got plenty of clients who lie to me all the time.”

Valentino’s chest tightened with panic as he watched Angel walk away. He darted forwards and grabbed his wrist, then tensed as he waited for the inevitable blast of electricity that happened whenever he tried to restrain Vox.

“Hey! Get off me!” Angel snapped.

No surge of electricity. Valentino dared to relax and his eyebrows pinched together curiously as he watched Angel struggle to free himself.

...Fascinating.

He couldn’t break free. Valentino was *stronger*.

He had never been in this position before. He had never been the strongest in the relationship.

“Stay,” Valentino said slowly, tightening his grip on Angel’s wrist and watching as the spider-demon fell limp in his grasp, frustration settling over his features.

“Let me go, Val,” Angel growled. “We’re done.”

“We can talk this out,” Valentino said carefully. “We can work through it if we try.”

Angel rolled his eyes. “What don’t you get about *‘I can’t trust you’*? If you think talking will help, why don’t you go after Vox and fix things with him? Maybe he’ll be more forgiving than you expect.”

Valentino eyed Angel’s other wrist. “I don’t want him. I want you.”

“Then you should have broken things off with him instead of cheating on him and lying to me.” Angel shook his head. “And I don’t know what you mean about him being emotionless. He looked pretty upset to me just then.”

“Maybe he was upset because he realised what he’s lost. Maybe he was upset because he realised that he’s ruined everything.” He suddenly grabbed Angel’s other wrist and Angel’s eyes widened, a flicker of wariness behind his gaze. He struggled against Valentino’s hold and used his lower set of arms to shove at the moth-demon’s chest, but Valentino grabbed those with his own spare hands.

Angel stilled. “Let me go, Valentino,” he said quietly, *nervously*.

Valentino licked his lips and shook his head. “...We... We were good together. We were *happy*. You make me feel... important.”

Angel scowled. “That was before I knew you were a lying, cheating asshole. We’re finished, Valentino. I’ll start looking for a place to rent and I’ll find another job. Consider this my

month's notice."

Valentino's heart shattered.

How come every time he found someone he cared about, they threw him away like trash? Why didn't he *matter* to anyone? Why was he so unloveable?

People only wanted him for what he could give them - for his talents in pleasure and for his drugged saliva. Why couldn't anyone want him for *him*? Why did everyone use and manipulate him? Why was he always the one left standing up to his knees in shit?

"Let me go, Val," Angel demanded, tugging his arms pointedly.

Valentino scowled at Angel. "You're no better than Vox. No better than Carlos. You think you can just use me and throw me away whenever you feel like it."

"Maybe *you're* the problem," Angel said before glancing at the door thoughtfully.

Suddenly, his third pair of arms appeared and he punched Valentino hard in the stomach, using Valentino's loosened grip to his advantage. He ran towards the door and panic shot through Valentino's chest, making him lurch forwards and grab Angel again.

They struggled for a moment before Valentino managed to pin Angel against the wall.

"Asshole!" Angel snarled and he clawed Valentino's face, drawing blood.

Valentino hissed and pressed their mouths together, shoving his tongue down Angel's throat in an effort to subdue him and avoid further injury.

After a few moments, Angel went pliant within his grip and kissed back eagerly.

Valentino wished that Angel would stay like this - willing and soft and desperate for his attention. Unfortunately, the moment the drug wore off, Angel would be fighting to escape him again, and Valentino would be alone once more. Unloved. Unwanted.

...Maybe there was a way to keep Angel.

Angel wasn't an Overlord. He wasn't as powerful as Vox. Valentino was *stronger* than Angel.

He pulled back a little, pleased when Angel pitched forwards with a dazed expression, chasing his lips for more.

"Ah ah ah, if you want more, you have to do something for me first," Valentino purred, anxiety prickling at his skin.

Angel blinked sluggishly. "Anything."

Valentino licked his lips. "You just have to sign a little contract for me, and I'm all yours."

There was a long pause before Angel frowned and squinted. "...A... contract?" He shook his head slowly and began to pry himself away from Valentino. "...No. No, I won't give you my soul."

Valentino kissed him again, harder, *longer*.

Angel grabbed his face and licked desperately inside his mouth as he ground their hips together.

“One little signature,” Valentino whispered against his lips. “Outside the studio you can do whatever you like, but in here... you’re mine. You’re mine to do with as I please. Mine to touch and worship and kiss. You’ll enjoy it, I promise. I’ll treat you right.” He kissed Angel again for good measure and the spider-demon’s eyes fluttered shut as he nodded.

Unease settled in Valentino’s gut but he pushed through anyway and summoned the contract.

He could always tear it up later if he wanted to.

“You’ll get a free room,” Valentino whispered as the contract began to shift and alter in response to his words. “You’ll be my star actor.”

Angel sucked at his lip and hummed before sliding their tongues together. He hooked a leg over Valentino’s hip and humped his bare cock. Finally, Valentino tore himself away from Angel’s swollen lips with an innocent smile.

He wiggled the contract in front of Angel.

“Sign on the dotted line and I’m all yours, amorcito.”

Angel signed his human name, ending it with a small heart. He smirked at Valentino and dragged him in for another kiss, barely noticing the pink chains sliding around his neck.

Valentino swallowed and his chest ached with misery.

“Vox, I swear to you that I would never abandon you to her!”

“Please, Vox. Please talk to me. Tell me what she did to you.”

“I love you. Of course, I love you. I was trying to protect you. I was trying to keep you safe.”

“I was possessed. She... She was controlling me. Please don’t electrocute me again...”

“Vox, stop! I miss you! Let me explain everything! I... I’m tired of fighting.”

“Come back to me, Picturebox. Please?”

Each time Alastor approached Vox, he would lie to him and pretend that he cared, and he wouldn’t leave until Vox forced him to - until Vox had discharged enough current through him to make him collapse. What Alastor was getting out of this little game was beyond Vox.

But as the months passed and his relationship with Valentino spiralled, Vox’s heart crumbled even further. Some of the things that Alastor said... he wanted them desperately. He wanted his old friend back, he wanted comfort, he wanted to have someone he could *trust*.

But Alastor had abandoned him. Had offered him to the creature in the bookshop to guarantee his own freedom and Vox could never trust him again.

He was the whole reason there was now a chain around Vox’s neck.

Temporary as it might be.

She wouldn’t let him leave without one, but with Vox threatening to self-destruct, she had been forced to come to a compromise. She clearly believed Vox would successfully complete the task she had given him, and Vox was determined to get out of his chain, so he would certainly try. Him fulfilling her request wouldn’t directly release her, so he had accepted with little guilt.

But he was alone and he had to come up with a plan himself on how to complete her task, and he was *exhausted* from his time in Purgatory. Valentino hadn't helped when he had confirmed everything that Purgatory had taught him about himself - about why he should be ashamed of his own body and distrusting of those closest to him. Why he should be disgusted with himself.

And finding Valentino in bed with Angel Dust certainly hadn't helped his insecurities.

His heart ached, his head ached, his body ached - a bone-deep sort of ache that had never left him since Purgatory.

He wanted to curl up in a corner and be forgotten about.

He wanted to break free of his chain and prove his power to everyone.

He wanted someone to hold him and tell him everything would be alright.

He closed his office door and slid down it, letting his head fall into his hands. He felt numb. Overwhelmed. Angry. *Heartbroken*. Why was it so easy for people to hurt him and throw him away? Why did everyone he loved betray him? Why was he so powerless to stop it? To make them stay?

He trembled a little as he was overwhelmed with grief. He might not have loved Valentino as deeply as he loved Alastor, but there had been something special between them. It was still a betrayal. His already broken heart shattered a little more.

Alastor's desperate words from their last few meetings played on loop in his head and in a moment of weakness, he picked himself up off the floor and zipped into the power cables overhead.

He needed help if he wanted to get rid of this chain.

He found Alastor shuffling back from Cannibal Town with his gaze low, clearly lost in thought.

Vox appeared behind him and tossed him into an empty alleyway, not bothering to flinch when Alastor shifted into his more demonic form, snarling and eyes dark as he smiled viciously at Vox.

Vox clasped his hands together behind his back and raised an unimpressed eyebrow. Immediately, Alastor returned to his normal form, ears pricked and gaze curious... and perhaps a little hopeful.

“Vox?”

“I have a proposal for you,” Vox said flatly. “I help you, you help me.”

Alastor stared at him for a long moment. “Go on.”

“Help me with a little royal side project, and I’ll play along with whatever game you’re playing with me,” Vox said with a disdainful sneer.

Alastor’s ears lowered a fraction. “...Game?” he queried quietly. “What game?”

Vox huffed and waved a hand theatrically. “This... torture where you pretend to care about me before you hurt me or betray me, or whatever other cruelty strikes your fancy.” He smiled bitterly. “I’ll even let you fuck me, if you like. You can point and laugh like everyone else. Do we have a deal?”

He held his hand out and Alastor stared at him with wide eyes and flat ears.

“...I’m not playing any sort of-”

Fury swept through Vox like a wildfire and he grabbed Alastor by the throat and slammed him against the wall.

“Finish that sentence. I fucking dare you,” he hissed beside Alastor’s ear, only to startle when Alastor’s shadows wrapped around his middle and threw him into the fence opposite. Alastor peeled himself off the wall with gritted teeth.

“I’m not playing a game, Vox!” he snapped, but there was frantic desperation in his eyes. Another clever trick. “I miss you, damn it! I’m *sorry* for everything I’ve done to you. I was trying to protect you but I failed.” He ran a shaky hand through his hair. “But you escaped without my help. And I’m grateful. I’m so grateful, even if you despise me and don’t trust me. But I can see how broken you are, how hollow your gaze is. I know what you’re going through. I want to help. Please, let me help, my dear.”

Charge crackled over Vox’s frame and a bolt of electricity left his hand, Alastor barely dodging the attack.

“You know *nothing*,” Vox hissed, electricity bolts narrowly missing Alastor’s body as the Radio Demon continued to evade him. “You’re a liar! You betrayed me! You left me at her mercy!”

“I didn’t!” Alastor snarled before he yelped as Vox’s energy hit his shoulder, burning it. He suddenly dissolved into the shadows and reappeared behind Vox before slamming him face-first against the fence.

Vox growled and struggled against him, but Alastor’s shadows wrapped around his neck and limbs, restraining him. Vox stilled, chest heaving.

For a moment, neither of them spoke and it took Vox a few seconds to realise that he was crying, water dripping off the bottom of his screen.

Alastor let his head fall gently against the back of Vox's boxy one as he pinned him.

Vox was hit with a memory of Purgatory; pinned to the floor by Alastor as the Radio Demon used a rusty blade to carve words like 'worthless' and 'disgusting' into his transparent flesh, uncaring how deep he sliced.

He squeezed his eyes shut and stifled a sob. It was getting more and more difficult to separate Purgatory Alastor from the real Alastor. They were slowly becoming the same person, capable of the same horrors.

He waited for the whispered words of revulsion, the humiliation, the torture of Alastor mutilating his body to make him look more repulsive...

"I'm sorry I couldn't protect you from her," Alastor breathed.

Vox stared unseeingly at the fence. What trick was he playing now? What torture would this new tactic lead to? How would he hurt Vox this round?

"I tried to trade places with you. Every day you were gone, I begged her to release you."

He slipped his arms carefully around Vox and held him and Vox stiffened and trembled. He prepared himself for a blade or a sharp claw, or whatever other weapon Alastor fancied using on him this time.

A choked sob left him when Alastor's frequency harmonised with his. It felt like coming home. It felt like paradise.

It felt as though the other shoe was about to drop. Vox bristled.

Alastor nuzzled the back of his head. "Talk to me. Tell me what happened."

He tightened his protective hold on Vox and Vox's knees threatened to buckle.

"We don't need to make a deal for me to help you, my dear," Alastor whispered. "If you need help, you simply have to ask. I would do anything for you."

He pressed his lips against the back of Vox's neck.

Vox curled his nails into his palms; the pain reminding him that none of this was real - that Alastor was playing a game with him.

Alastor didn't love him. Alastor was *bored* of him. Alastor was *toying* with him.

Why was it so easy for Alastor to stop loving Vox and so damn difficult for Vox to stop loving Alastor?

He squeezed his eyes shut. He could pretend to hate Alastor. Hiss nasty words at him. Fight him. Tell everyone else that they were enemies. Maybe one day he would convince himself that he actually did hate the Radio Demon.

"You accept the terms then?" Vox managed, keeping his voice steady. "We'll be business partners for however long it takes to carry out my project and in the meantime, I'll take part in your sick game."

Alastor sighed softly and released him. "How can I convince you to believe me?" he asked in defeat.

Vox whirled around and held out a hand with a sharp smile. "I'll believe you if you agree to be my temporary business partner."

Alastor closed his eyes and stepped backwards. He clasped his hands behind his back. “I’m afraid I’ll have to decline,” he said quietly and for some reason, that *hurt*.

Vox clenched his fists, chest aching. “Figures you won’t help me. Don’t know why I’m surprised.”

Alastor frowned. “I never said I wouldn’t help you.”

“You’ve said enough, asshole,” Vox growled before stalking towards the mouth of the alley.

Fingers closed around his wrist and Vox whirled around, punching Alastor squarely in the mouth. Alastor staggered backwards with wide eyes and Vox panted for a few seconds before pain and anguish and fury bubbled over within him and he laid into Alastor with his fists.

Alastor took a couple of hits before fighting back and it didn’t take long for them to use their abilities against each other, destroying fences and power lines and street lamps in their wake, and terrifying anyone unlucky enough to be passing by.

Finally, Alastor pressed Vox up against a wall with a snarl, hands around his throat and dials flickering in his eyes. His coat was tattered and his face was streaked with blood. Vox glowered at him through the thin cracks on his screen.

“Do it,” Vox challenged lowly. “You’ve broken me every other way. What’s a murder between old pals?”

Alastor stared into his eyes before his anger dimmed. “Tell me how to fix this,” he begged softly.

Vox smashed his head into Alastor’s, uncaring that it broke his screen further as long as it hurt Alastor.

“You can’t,” Vox growled. “So either kill me or leave me the fuck alone, you smiling freak.”

Alastor plucked a tiny shard of glass from his face with a grimace before scowling at Vox and disappearing into the shadows.

Vox sucked in a breath as something inside him finally snapped.

He was well and truly alone.

He had to enact The Voice’s request on his own, or he would be stuck with this chain around his neck *forever*.

...Fine.

He didn’t need anyone’s help anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Some dubious consent going on towards the end of Val's section.

Time skip(s) imminent :)

Chapter 31: When The Pot Boils Over

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Alastor stumbled into the bookshop with a snarl, body aching and bruised from his fight with Vox.

“What did you do to him?” Alastor roared and as usual, he received no response. The Voice hadn’t spoken to him since she had taken Vox.

Alastor clenched his fists and unleashed his shadows, wreaking chaos upon the bookshop, toppling cases, breaking furniture, and smashing anything unfortunate enough to be hanging on the walls.

Alastor panted as he commanded his shadows to destroy everything within reach, and his silhouette slithered out of him with a silent howl of fury before joining in on the havoc.

“Answer me, you bitch!” Alastor snarled at the ceiling, his body morphing into something grotesque and bloodthirsty.

Silence.

Alastor threw the armchair across the room, snapping its legs.

“What did you put him through?” Alastor screeched, static heavy in his voice.

He bared his teeth and waited, and when nothing happened, he frowned and touched his neck, summoning the chain that lay heavy around it.

She was clearly still alive, but maybe there was a reason she wasn't answering...

He stiffened and glanced at the window, fingering the chain for a moment as he thought.

Vox couldn't have...

...Could he?

He licked his lips and figured out a plan.

A few days later, he ambushed Vox in his own studio, easily bypassing the security cameras by using the shadows to his advantage.

He paused in the corner of the room, watching Vox scowl and click his tongue at a stack of paperwork, shoulders hunched and fingers drumming restlessly against his desk as his leg bounced beneath it.

Static prickled the air and Vox's frequency dipped and climbed erratically with his frustration.

Alastor observed him for a few moments and his chest started to ache. It *hurt* to see Vox like this - so angry and bitter and lonely.

Vox was supposed to be fun and playful and light-spirited. He had once brightened Alastor's miserable afterlife, had made him feel things that Alastor hadn't thought himself capable of. Alastor had been addicted to his teasing and soft smiles.

He barely recognised this Vox.

This glitchy, distrusting, broken Overlord.

Alastor swallowed. He had caused this. He had *destroyed* Vox. It was time he repaired the damage.

He stepped out of the shadows and Vox remained oblivious to his presence. He approached the overworked demon and cleared his throat quietly. “Vox.”

Vox had him pinned against a filing cabinet, one hand squeezing his throat before Alastor had time to blink. The Television Demon’s face glitched and charge crackled between his antennae.

“What the fuck do you want?” Vox snarled.

“To talk,” Alastor managed and he blinked, surprised by Vox’s strength. He supposed he shouldn’t be - Vox had collected quite a few souls during their friendship and he wasn’t the wannabe media Overlord that Alastor had first met. He had, after all, learned a lot of tricks from Alastor himself.

Still, Vox didn’t quite possess the power that Alastor had.

“Not interested,” growled Vox and he released Alastor and slunk back to his desk. “Go manipulate some other sorry bastard.”

Alastor wrinkled his nose. Vox had developed such a *crude* vocabulary in recent months and it didn’t suit him. He had once been a gentleman, now he cursed like a sailor.

“Did you release her?” Alastor asked bluntly and Vox hesitated above his chair. He turned his head slightly but didn’t meet Alastor’s gaze.

“What are you talking about?”

“Did you release her?” Alastor asked. “Did you complete the trials?” Alastor knew how determined the other Overlord could be, how clever and calculating. If anyone had a chance at beating the trials, it was Vox.

Vox gritted his teeth and sank into his chair. “Get out of my office, asshole.”

Alastor marched towards him and whirled the swivel chair around, bracing his arms on the rests and blocking Vox in.

“Did you finish the trials?” Alastor demanded, searching Vox’s face for something he recognised. Or perhaps he was searching for forgiveness. Maybe even affection.

His chest tightened. He missed the old Vox.

His Vox.

Vox glowered at him and Alastor nearly lost his breath at the *despair* in his gaze. He knew the answer to his question before Vox managed to open his mouth.

“I didn’t even complete the first one,” Vox snarled before shoving at Alastor’s chest. “But, hey, at least I’m not a floating corpse, right? That’s what you were hoping for, wasn’t it? For me to rot up there with the others, so you could have your *freedom*. ”

Alastor shook his head slowly and jerked out of the way when Vox attempted to discharge a few hundred volts through him.

“Liar!” Vox spat and Alastor quickly held his hands up and summoned the chain around his throat.

Vox froze, eyes wide.

“I promise you,” said Alastor quietly, ears lowering. “I didn’t trade your soul for my freedom. I would never do that to you. I’ve only ever tried to protect you.” He smiled thinly. “...Even if it didn’t always seem that way.”

Vox stared at him in silence for a long moment before taking a step backwards and shaking his head. “...You’re lying. This is a trick.”

“It isn’t,” Alastor said softly as he held out a hand towards Vox in a silent offer of comfort.

Vox blinked at the hand as though Alastor was pointing an angel’s blade at him. His screen glitched and he stumbled into his desk as he shook his head frantically. “No. No, that... That isn’t true. You... You *abandoned* me! You left me to her mercy!”

Alastor shook his head slowly. “I didn’t. She was possessing me. Deceiving you. She wanted you to believe that I didn’t care for you.”

Vox’s antennae fritzed and sparked fitfully. “You don’t!” he hissed, but his voice shook and his eyes were wide and round. “You got bored of me! You... You want me out of the way!”

Alastor carefully took Vox’s hand, rubbing his thumb over the other man’s knuckles. “No,” he said gently. “Never. I want you by my side. I always will.”

Vox trembled and Alastor’s heart broke at the sight of Vox so lost and confused. Electricity bounced over his frame and his screen glitched rapidly and Alastor’s shoulders sagged.

He spread his other arm in invitation. "Come here, my love," he whispered. "Let me hold you."

Vox shook violently before he squeezed his eyes shut against the tears that were threatening to fall.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he whimpered finally. "What do you have to gain from this?"

The words were like a dagger through Alastor's heart. What exactly had Vox been through in Purgatory?

"You," Alastor said quietly. "I have *you* to gain from this. And I will keep returning to you until you believe me. Until you understand how much you mean to me."

Vox clenched his fists and hunched in on himself, refusing to look at Alastor. He tore his hand from Alastor's grip.

"Shit. I can't keep doing this," he whispered and Alastor frowned and tried to catch his eye.

"...Can't keep doing what?"

"This!" Vox snarled, suddenly shoving Alastor away from him. "I can't keep going through this endless cycle of torture! Of *hoping* that you're telling the truth only for you to rip out my heart and put a fist through my screen! I'm *exhausted*, Alastor! I'm tired of playing your games, of wondering how you're going to punish me next!"

Alastor opened his mouth but the words died in his throat. He swallowed and Vox bared his teeth and suddenly hurled him against the desk, pinning him there.

“Fucking get it over with!” Vox spat, curling his fingers into Alastor’s coat. “Do whatever it is you came here to do.”

Alastor scrambled desperately for a response. “I... I don’t-”

He cut himself off. Vox was crying, tears dripping off the bottom of his screen despite the anger in his expression.

They stared at each other for a long moment before Alastor tentatively raised a hand to cup the side of Vox’s head.

Vox flinched and Alastor stilled, heart missing a beat.

“...What did *I* do to you up there?” Alastor breathed, horror creeping into his gaze as he pieced the puzzle together.

“Why can’t you just leave me alone?” Vox asked softly as he pulled away from Alastor. “You know I won’t fight back. You know how I feel about you. Why can’t you give me time to move on? Why are you punishing me?”

“I’m not,” Alastor said desperately. “I’m not trying to punish you. I’m trying to make you understand that I love-”

Another flinch.

Alastor stopped and studied Vox. He studied his tense shoulders and the broken, distrusting scowl, and the way he wouldn’t look the Radio Demon in the face. Alastor felt sick.

“...This can’t be fixed,” he said quietly, an unbearable pain blossoming in his chest. “Nothing I say will make it better.”

Vox wrapped his arms around himself. “You’re the one who wanted to break it, not me.”

Alastor’s hands fell limply to his sides. “...I didn’t.”

Vox scowled. “Go fuck yourself.”

This was it.

The end of their friendship.

Forever.

Alastor inhaled sharply and raked his gaze over Vox’s frame. He wasn’t ready to let go. Why did no one stay? Every time he found someone he thought he could trust, they left. First his parents, then Harriet, now Vox...

Why was he destined to be alone? Why did people find it so easy to push him away?

Vox was supposed to be special. He was supposed to *stay*. Vox had taught him how to touch and be touched and now...

Now he was alone again. Prey. Feared yet lusted after. Hell hadn’t seemed so bad with Vox by his side, but now it was worse than ever, because Alastor had lost *everything*. Alastor had already had a taste of something he wasn’t meant to have; a taste of *happiness*. He could have been happy with Vox.

“I’m not ready to lose you,” Alastor whispered, surprised by the crack in his own voice.

Vox scoffed and turned his head away from Alastor. "I was never yours."

Alastor bristled, fury and anguish and shame colliding in his chest and making him clench his fists. It was the most bare-faced lie Vox had ever told.

"From the day we met, you were mine," Alastor hissed and Vox threw him a withering look.

"Get out, Alastor. And don't come back."

Alastor narrowed his eyes. "So this is it? Twenty years of friendship means nothing to you?"

Vox smiled sharply, like a shark ready to strike, and Alastor's ears straightened, tail attempting to stand to attention beneath his clothes as his fight-or-flight instincts kicked in. He had never thought of Vox as a *predator* before, but now it was clear to see that Vox was exactly that.

"That's rich coming from you, old pal," Vox said lowly. "Where was that thought when you beat me half to death in the middle of the street? Where was that thought when you left me to die at the hands of your master?"

Alastor scowled and pointedly lifted the black chain trailing from his throat. "As I keep telling you, I never traded my freedom for your life."

He choked when Vox lurched forwards and gripped his chain, hurling him face-first into the floor. Vox suddenly settled on top of him, one hand on the back of his head to hold him down and Alastor froze at the position, trapped in memories of both his human life and his brief time in Purgatory.

His pulse raced and his breaths grew quick and shallow and sweat collected at the back of his neck as he was forced to relive the nightmares over and over.

Vox kneeled above his hips and Alastor couldn't *breathe*.

"You're a liar," Vox hissed, voice glitching with his mounting distress. "I know how you really feel. I *saw* it. She showed me. I know how disgusted you are by me. I know what you think of doing to me, how much *pleasure* it brings you to see me suffer by your hand."

Alastor's jaw ached from clenching his teeth so hard. He fought through the fog of memories - the hands pawing at him, groping him, the feeling of being *violated* over and over, helpless to fight back, *powerless* - and tried to sort through Vox's words.

"...I don't understand," he managed, voice barely a whisper, and Vox snarled and sent a burst of electricity racing through his nervous system. Alastor cried out in pain.

"I know you think I'm a freak," snarled Vox, tightening his grip on Alastor's hair and digging his free set of claws into his back. "I know you think I'm weak and pathetic and desperate. I know you dream of spilling my blood, of carving your thoughts into my skin." He yanked Alastor's head up by his hair. "I won't let you," he hissed.

The hair-pulling combined with the weight of Vox above his hips was too much, and fear overwhelmed Alastor as he commanded his shadows to wrap around Vox's throat and *squeeze*.

Vox gagged and scrambled at the formless tendrils and Alastor rolled onto his back and saw not Vox, but one of the men that had so easily overpowered him in his human life. Suddenly, he was back in that forest, alone and outnumbered, and his chest heaved with panic as he lashed out at the monster above him. He clawed and kicked and his assailant howled in agony, tumbling off him.

Alastor crawled frantically away from the other man, terror filling his chest when fingers closed around his ankle and dragged him back in, just like they had all those years ago. He kicked out again, vaguely recognising the sound of glass breaking, and he scrambled to his feet only to have a body slam into him and bend him over the desk.

Hands pinned his wrists to the desk surface and a body pressed heavily against his and Alastor struggled desperately, heart galloping.

“Fucking-king a-a-asshole!” yelled a distorted, unfamiliar voice - but it was a male voice and Alastor panted as he threw his wild gaze around the room, searching for an escape route.

He was startled when his silhouette appeared in front of him with a feral expression and launched itself at his attacker, and Alastor suddenly remembered that he wasn’t the helpless young man he had been all those decades ago.

He ordered his shadows to attack the monster on top of him and there was a shriek of agony before the weight was lifted from his body. He turned around with a vicious snarl, then hissed in pain as a shard of glass tore through his cheek.

He dodged a second attack and pounced upon his assailant, determined to end the monster’s life, and when electricity surged through him, burning his skin and organs and making him cough up blood, he ordered his shadows and silhouette to tear into his rapist, choking and whipping and carving gaping wounds into his flesh.

His silhouette stopped its vicious attack, suddenly looking horrified and it slithered behind Alastor and tugged urgently at his shoulder.

Alastor gave it a wild-eyed look of confusion before focusing his attention upon the monster from his past.

...Except it wasn’t one of the rapists from his past.

It was *Vox*.

A very broken, very bloodied Vox with a cracked screen, panting heavily as he clutched a shard of glass that had fallen out of his now-distorted face.

Alastor froze, hands trembling.

What had he done?

Vox glowered at him for a long moment before gritting his teeth and disappearing into the lights.

Alastor stumbled backwards a few steps before his knees buckled as he hit the desk. He fell onto its edge and stared at his own shaking, crimson-slicked hands.

His silhouette bounced from wall to wall hysterically.

Silence settled over the room and Alastor looked around it slowly - at the damaged furniture and blood spatters and singe marks. It took him a moment to realise how burned his clothes were and he winced at how areas of his skin had blistered from the intensity of Vox's electricity. He slid his gaze to the space Vox had been occupying moments ago.

"I'm sorry," he choked out.

"Too late for that."

Alastor's head was yanked backwards until he was almost horizontal against the desk, and there was just enough time to see Vox's shattered face contorted in fury before the shard of glass he was clutching impaled Alastor's eye.

Alastor *howled* and shot upright as he lost half of his vision, but Vox slammed him down against the desk once more. He leaned close to a twitching ear.

"Next time, I'll slit your throat with it," Vox whispered. "Run while you still can, *Bambi*."

Frustration and pain had his antlers growing and he smashed them into Vox's already-vulnerable screen.

"Fuck!" Vox screamed as the image of his face cut to black. Alastor rolled over quickly and wrapped a hand around Vox's throat.

"I'm not your prey, *old pal*," Alastor growled, using Vox's taunts against him. "Don't *ever* treat me as such."

"Not yet," managed Vox around a glitching vocoder. "But one day I'll be your equal and I'll take *everything* from you. I'll kill you, make no mistake, and all your power will be *mine*."

Alastor felt lightheaded and he swayed a little, the room spinning. He could feel blood trickling down his cheek from his eye and he felt nauseous, but perhaps that wasn't solely due to his ruptured eye...

He scowled at Vox, heart breaking.

He didn't know this man anymore. This wasn't the demon he loved.

His smile sharpened into something strained and dangerous, even though Vox couldn't see it. He felt as though he were going mad - perhaps it was the blood loss?

"I'd like to see you try," he said, voice filters off as a crackly laugh track echoed behind his words.

He dissolved into the shadows before Vox could reply.

It had been six months since his altercation with Alastor. Physically, Vox was fully healed and his head had been repaired with the help of a moody Valentino, who Vox couldn't fire because he *owned* part of VoxTek now. Not one of Vox's brighter ideas, to say the least.

Mentally, well... that was a different story.

Vox surrounded himself with security cameras and guards, shaken by how easy it had been for Alastor to gain access to his office and attack him. He began keeping tabs on Alastor to ensure his own safety, but Alastor picked up on his efforts quickly and somehow distorted his image on Vox's cameras.

Vox began to worry that Alastor was *plotting*. Would the Radio Demon kill him next time they crossed paths? Vox didn't want to find out.

The truth was that his threats on Alastor's life had been mostly empty. He wasn't afraid of defending himself, but he knew he would never be able to kill Alastor - even after everything the man had put him through.

Love was... frustrating.

He growled and fingered the chain at his neck. He needed to stop being so distracted by Alastor if he wanted any hope of removing this damn *leash*.

He returned his attention to the letter he was writing and startled when an alarm rang out, alerting him that he had a visitor. He flicked his gaze to his monitoring station and raised an eyebrow at the very ornate hat taking up the majority of the camera's view.

He buzzed his visitor in and unlocked his office door.

“Rosie,” he greeted quietly as he stood and gestured to the seat opposite his. “What brings you here? Sit, I’ll make you some tea.”

Rosie hovered in front of the door with a thick scowl. Vox straightened. “Uh... Is everything alri-”

“I don’t know what went on between you two, but *fix it*.”

Vox blinked before a scowl slowly took over his expression. “Why don’t you have this conversation with Alastor instead? Why come to me?”

“I’ve already had this conversation with Alastor,” Rosie said tersely. “I was disappointed by his response.”

Vox smiled bitterly. “Then I’m afraid that you’re going to be equally disappointed by mine. There’s nothing to fix. He made it quite clear how he feels about me and I made it quite clear how I feel about him.” He shook his head. “Look, Rosie, this doesn’t change anything between *us*. I consider you a good friend, I always have, but *please* put this to rest. I’m tired of living a lie. I just want to forget about him,” he said, ignoring the expensive monitoring station to the side of the room that was built solely to help him keep an eye on Alastor.

Rosie pursed her lips. “There are things you don’t know about him,” she said quietly.

Vox clenched his fists, anger swirling in his gut. “Then tell me. Tell me how it justifies him beating me to a bloody pulp not once, but *twice*. Tell me how it justifies him leading me on, *lying* to me for years. Go on. Spill his secrets!”

Rosie licked her lips, looking torn. “He never shares them with anyone, Vox. It isn’t fair of me to tell you. If you could just talk to him-”

“*Talk to him?*” Vox laughed incredulously. “He tried to kill me! Twice! Three times if you count him abandoning me in that damn bookshop!”

Rosie shook her head quickly. “He explained to me what happened. He never left you. He was-”

Charge crackled between Vox’s antennae. “I swear, Rosie, if you say he was *possessed*, I will staple your mouth shut.”

Rosie blinked and narrowed her eyes and Vox had enough decency to duck his head apologetically. “That was... I didn’t mean...” He sighed. “I’m sorry, Rosie.”

She graciously moved past it. “I don’t know exactly what happened between you two, but I can see that you’re both hurting,” she said gently. “You long for each other, for things to go back to the way they were, but both of you are too stubborn to forgive each other. Why don’t you let me be a mediator? Come to my emporium, you two can talk it out over tea and sandwiches and I’ll be there to make sure things don’t go south. How about that?”

Vox was surprised by the amount of fear and anxiety filling him at the prospect of seeing Alastor again. He shook his head quickly. “No, Rosie.”

She looked faintly surprised. “No? Vox, don’t you want things to go back to how they were?”

“They can’t!” he snapped and she recoiled at his hysterical anger. “You don’t understand. He puts on that fake smile and *acts* like he cares, but you don’t know what he really thinks about me. You don’t know what he did to me up there...”

Rosie frowned. “...Up where?”

Vox blinked and tried to remember if the Alastor in purgatory had been the same Alastor as the one in Hell. They certainly behaved the same way. They talked the same way. They both *hated* Vox. They liked to torture him and taunt him...

Purgatory Alastor was based on the real Alastor anyway, wasn't he?

Vox's head hurt. He squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed at his chest, feeling for words carved into his flesh that had long since vanished.

Filthy.

Pervert.

Whore.

Worthless.

"Vox."

He jumped and focused on Rosie once more. She frowned at him worriedly. "Up *where?*" she repeated before she straightened as the epiphany struck. "In Purgatory? Alastor told me that you were taken. Oh, darling, he was absolutely distraught. He thought he would never see you again-"

"Rosie, *stop*," Vox growled and Rosie grimaced before shaking her head at herself.

"I didn't even think to ask how you are. I assumed this was all about Alastor but it never crossed my mind that it might actually be about-"

"Stop!" Vox snarled, eye swirling hypnotically, forcing Rosie to clamp her mouth shut.

It felt as though something was trying to crawl out of his throat. It felt as though he were drowning. He felt as though he was about to collapse.

Rosie looked alarmed and Vox released her from her trance. She licked her lips and he averted his gaze.

“Just stop,” he said softly.

She was silent for a little while, merely observing him, before she tentatively opened her arms. “Come here, sweetheart.”

Vox wanted to sob. He shuffled over to her and collapsed against her deceptively strong frame and she held him tightly and rubbed his back. He flinched when her hand grazed one of the ports beside his spine and although it was unlikely that she could feel it through his clothes, he tore away from her instinctively.

She stared at him in surprise.

He was a freak. He didn’t want her to look at him the way Alastor had, the way Valentino had, the way *everyone* had. He didn’t want her to know what he was hiding beneath his clothes.

It was bad enough she had to look at his ugly box of a head.

He wrapped his arms around himself. He wanted to be alone. He didn’t want her to look at him.

“Please go,” he said quietly.

She looked bewildered. “Vox?”

“I’m just not ready to-” He cut himself off and frowned as a thought occurred to him. He glanced at Rosie from the corner of his eye. “...Alastor never shares his secrets with anyone but both you and Valentino know about them.” He scowled and his arms fell to his sides. “So, that means that I’m the only one he *didn’t* trust.”

Rosie shook her head. “Hold on, Vox. I don’t know about Valentino, but the only reason I know is because I was the one to find Alastor when he first arrived down here. He was an open book back then. He told me everything-”

“Doesn’t change the fact that he didn’t trust me,” Vox growled. “Which proves that it was all a lie, that he never truly cared. I told him *everything* but he held onto his secrets.” He clenched his fists. “I should’ve seen it sooner.”

“Now that isn’t fair,” Rosie said firmly. “If you talked to him, if you *knew* what he-”

“Then tell me!” Vox said with a false grin as he spread his arms wide. “Reveal his precious secrets!”

Rosie hesitated and Vox’s grin sharpened as the epiphany struck him. “No? Figures. You’ve always preferred Alastor. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d set you up to this - he knows he can’t get past my security so he sends a good friend to spy on me, knowing I’ll let you in.”

Rosie looked bewildered. “...What are you talking about?”

She was a convincing actor.

But Vox had figured it all out.

“I should have known,” he scoffed. “You would always take his side over mine.”

“...I’m not taking sides, Vox.”

“Sure you aren’t,” he said in his most charming businessman tone. “I think, perhaps, you should leave.” His face darkened. “And don’t come back.”

Rosie was silent for a moment. “You’re making a mistake,” she said quietly. “Being locked in here on your own isn’t doing you any good. You’re overworked, paranoid, *obsessed* with conspiracies that everyone is against you.”

“This is Hell,” Vox reminded. “Everyone *is* against me.”

“I’m not,” Rosie said, placing a hand over her chest. “Please listen to me, dear.”

Vox smiled. “Get out before I throw you out, you traitorous bitch.”

Rosie stiffened and the air grew heavier, more cloying for a few seconds before Rosie sighed and tipped her head.

“My door is open when you are ready to speak respectfully to me.” And with that, she whirled on her heel and left.

Vox glared at the closed door and contemplated whether or not to *scream*.

He was quickly hit with a better idea and he stormed downstairs to one of Valentino’s sets, pleased to note that filming had finished and Valentino was comparing different patterns of duvets for his next shoot.

“No spider whore today?” Vox growled and Valentino jumped and scowled at Vox.

“It’s his day off. What do you want?”

Vox smiled bitterly and prowled towards Valentino. “I want you to fuck me.”

Valentino made a face as though he had been slapped. “You broke things off between us, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Changed my mind,” Vox purred as he dropped to his knees in front of Valentino and traced a finger around the bulge in the skin-tight fishnet leggings Valentino was sporting. Honestly, the outfits he filmed in were growing more and more ridiculous.

Valentino scoffed and put a heeled boot on Vox’s chest, shoving him away.

...That was kinda hot, actually.

“Piss off,” Valentino snorted.

“Use me,” Vox demanded. “I’m angry, you’re angry, let’s work our frustrations out together.” He gripped Valentino’s leg and *pulled*, and Valentino tumbled onto the bed. Vox stood and lingered at the foot of the bed.

Valentino dug his heel into Vox’s chest, leaving a small bruise. Vox relished the pain. It had occurred to him that everyone would always want to hurt him, but at least this time, he was in control of the situation. He could step away if he liked.

“I’m angry at *you*, you freak,” Valentino growled before pushing Vox away again.

“Then show me,” Vox purred as he took his shirt off.

The only reason anyone wanted to touch him was to hurt him or humiliate him, but if Vox *asked* them to hurt or degrade him through sex, then at least he would get pleasure out of it.

At least someone would touch him and he wouldn't be so ashamed of himself.

Valentino sneered in disgust and averted his gaze. "Who would want to fuck you?"

Vox carefully restrained his flinch. He was in control of this situation, not Valentino. He wouldn't let the moth-demon's words sting him.

"I'll let you do whatever you want to me," Vox offered. "I can take it. I've got replaceable parts."

"Not interested. I have Angel now. He *wants* me."

Vox pressed his lips together. It had hurt to see Angel stay with Valentino after Vox had walked in on them. He had hoped the spider-demon would leave - he'd seemed upset that Valentino had lied to him. Obviously, Angel had low standards when it came to relationships.

Not that Vox's were any better, apparently.

"Oh? So, now you want to be faithful? Too late for that, Val," Vox said coolly and Valentino bared his teeth.

"What is wrong with you?"

Vox gripped Valentino's lace shirt and Valentino stilled, unwilling to damage the material.

"I want someone to choke me and hit me and stroke my cock at the same time. I want someone to call me a worthless whore as they come down my throat. I want someone to fuck me until I bleed. I want pleasure and pain and unfortunately, you're the only one I actually trust to give me that without trying to *kill* me," Vox grated out.

Valentino narrowed his eyes and there was a hint of concern in the expression.

Vox bristled and punched him hard in the mouth.

Valentino snarled at him, wings flaring and lip bleeding, and he suddenly kicked Vox into the dresser and pounced on him. Vox realised he was holding a torn strip of Valentino's shirt.

"That was expensive," Valentino growled before he rammed his tongue into Vox's mouth and slammed his spine into the edge of the dresser so hard that Vox cried out.

"Shut up, you pathetic slut," Valentino hissed before wrapping a hand around Vox's throat and using another to dig long scratches into his chest. "Now, strip, and let me see how fucking ugly you are."

Vox shivered and did as ordered, and something inside his chest withered and died.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Mentions of rape and humiliation/degradation throughout the chapter

Ok so, first small time skip of 6 months! We are well and truly watching them become their cannon selves ;) Another larger skip in the next chapter :)

Chapter 32: A Walk Down Memory Lane

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Vox stared numbly at the mess Alastor had made of his body. Components sparked and smoked inside him and his intestines hung haphazardly out of the gaping hole in his stomach. He pushed them back in silently and tried not to look at the cruel words Alastor and Valentino had etched into his transparent flesh with fragments of glass from his own screen.

“I was free once.”

Vox could barely muster a frown and his hands fell limply to his sides as he listened to The Voice. She had offered him deals many times before, but this was the first time she had offered him a temporary one. This was the first time he hadn't threatened to activate his self-destruct sequence. It was almost comical the number of times he had tried to forfeit the trials, only for her to command her lost souls to interfere.

She needed him. Vox wasn't sure how to feel about that.

Currently, he wasn't sure how to feel about much of anything.

“When life first began, I watched from the darkness. I watched the fish jump onto land and grow legs. I watched the birds learn to fly and I watched the dinosaurs burn. I was a mere idea once, but as life developed, so did I. My potential grew, along with my hunger. Then humanity took its first steps and I was granted a form. I was no longer satisfied scavenging off simple animal instinct and behaviour; I longed for a taste of humanity and its complexities.”

Vox scowled at the jagged letters that tore through his flesh. Vile. Desperate. Trash.

“You had such potential. But you were locked in that garden and guarded by powerful angels. Angels sent to keep things like me out. They were so... righteous,” she growled the last word as though it left a sour taste in her mouth.

Vox flicked his gaze to his other arm. Rotten. Soiled. Idiot.

“But I am nothing if not patient. I took a piece of myself and placed it in an apple seed, and threw it over the wall.” She chuckled softly. “A tree grew from it. A big one with beautiful fruit.”

Vox stared at his legs. Whore. Pervert. Robot. Freak.

“One of the angels took notice. He was bright-eyed and curious and he was sent to the garden to observe humanity and protect it from the inside. He noticed the new tree with its beautiful fruit and he took a bite to make sure it was safe for his precious humans.”

Vox closed his eyes, unwilling to look at the words any longer.

“I had never been able to feed off angels before, but suddenly I was in his veins. He was overwhelmingly joyful and bright and hopeful, but there were tiny cracks in the facade - fear of his ideas being laughed at, of disappointing his family, of failing his duty to protect humanity... So, I spoke to him. I whispered to him from the corners of his own mind and he came searching for me with questions about the tree.”

She paused, but when she next spoke, she sounded as though she was smiling. “I told him that he’d eaten from the Fruit of Knowledge. I told him that it granted free will and a deep understanding of the universe to all those who ingested it. I told him to share it with his humans and he did because he had never heard someone lie before.”

Vox opened his eyes and frowned. He knew this story, but he had never heard it told like this.

“The three humans ate their apples and took me inside them and suddenly, the world wasn’t such a safe and happy place. The angels noticed their fear and shame and knew that something was wrong. The brightest angel told the others what he had done and they found me. I explained what I was and they were horrified. They cast the humans out of the garden and the curious angel with them, because he was infected too.”

Her voice darkened. “And then they summoned their most powerful ranks and locked me in this terrible prison.”

Vox frowned and raised his gaze, staring up into the dark void.

“They created this place. They chained me up and designed the trials to stop anyone from helping me to escape, but I was here long before they were,” she growled. “I’m part of the universe. I flow inside humanity’s veins, inside heavenly and hellish veins. Being locked in here doesn’t stop me from feeding, it merely restricts how much I eat.”

Vox licked his lips and drew his knees to his chest, suddenly feeling very small. “Who are you?” he asked quietly. “What are you?”

“They named me the Root of All Evil,” she said viciously and there seemed to be a manic grin in her voice.

Vox carefully filed that information away for later. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

“Because,” she said, somewhat more calmly, “the Archangels locked me up and took the key. I want you to bring that key here.”

“How am I supposed to find the key?” he asked, hooking his screen over his knees. The air was cool and an icy breeze lapped against his skin whenever she spoke.

“Stupid picturebox. There is no physical key. The Archangels and their magic are the key. I need you to bring one here so they can undo their magic.”

Vox lowered his gaze in submission at the insult. “How do I even contact an Archangel? They won’t talk to a demon. They’re all in Heaven.”

She chuckled and the sound made Vox shiver.

“Not all of them.”

The disco era faded to a not-too-distant memory, making way for a new decade of modern rock. Vox quite enjoyed the fresh sounds and it was this that he listened to as he straightened his tailcoat.

He had to make a good impression today if he wanted any hope of getting rid of his chain.

He practised smiling in the mirror, working out his most charming grin and he fiddled with his cherry bowtie as he did so. The tie was somewhat of a sticking point - he should have bought a black or navy one to match the rest of his suit, but the colour had suddenly reminded him of softer, gentler memories with a certain old friend; memories of dancing along a canal, of meandering walks through the park, of warm laughter and late chats into the early hours of the morning, and Vox's chest had hurt.

In a moment of weakness, he had bought the tie. Now, as he looked at it in the mirror, it was a reminder of who had caused his misery. It reminded him that the chain around his throat was the fault of the Radio Demon.

He scowled. Once this chain was off, he would burn the tie.

“You look nice.”

His scowl faded, to be replaced by a weary expression. He glanced over his shoulder at Valentino. The past few years had seen them break up and shuffle back into one another's beds more times than either of them cared to count. They were both broken and angry and they knew how toxic their relationship was, but a strange sort of trust had developed between them that had them returning to each other even when they knew it wasn't healthy.

Sometimes, they even cared about one another, but mostly they wound up hurting each other more.

“Thanks,” Vox said quietly and Valentino hesitated before closing the distance between them and snaking his arms around Vox from behind. He pressed his lips to the back of Vox’s neck and Vox’s eyes slipped shut as he leaned against the moth-demon.

“You can do this, cariño,” Valentino whispered as he spread a hand over Vox’s heart. “I know you can.”

Vox’s chest tightened. He wasn’t exactly sure what had made him reveal his chain to Valentino, but perhaps it was because he didn’t trust anyone else with the information. He had revealed it during one of their many arguments, and it was the first time Valentino had shut up and let him *win*.

Vox didn’t talk about it much, but sometimes he would summon the chain and let Valentino use it to throw him around and choke him. In rare softer moments, Valentino would hold him and kiss the bruises at his throat and whisper sweet, comforting words as tears of frustration and grief rolled down Vox’s screen.

With a quiet exhale, Vox turned in Valentino’s arms and kissed him gently. Valentino held him tighter and rubbed his back before reluctantly pulling away and laying a hand upon the side of his casing. Vox leaned into his palm almost desperately. He craved these moments, this rare gentleness and affection, and he knew Valentino did too.

But they couldn’t keep it up, because Valentino was nauseated by Vox’s body and Vox was wounded by the fact that Valentino slipped into that spider-demon’s bed whenever they broke up - and sometimes when they were still together.

And then there was the issue that despite the years of distance between them, there was still a small part of Vox that cared for Alastor, and Valentino knew it. It hurt him to no end that Vox would never love him as deeply as he had loved Alastor - that he would never hold *all* of his heart like Alastor once had.

Which, in hindsight, was probably why Valentino buried himself in Angel Dust.

“I’m not sure about the tie,” Valentino murmured after a moment, thumb caressing the side of Vox’s face.

“It reminds me of your wings,” Vox lied, because he wanted the comfort to last a little longer.

Valentino’s eyebrows raised in surprise for a moment before his gaze softened. “Love you, mi amor.”

Vox turned his head and kissed his palm. “Love you too,” he lied and both of them knew it. Still, Valentino trailed his fingers down the side of Vox’s face and over his throat.

“If anyone can beat her, it’s you,” Valentino whispered.

Vox’s expression softened and he pulled Valentino in for another gentle kiss.

He had spent *years* studying, observing, drafting and redrafting plans, and today was the day that he would enact them. Today was the beginning of the end of his contract.

He had worried that this opportunity would never present itself, but when the first Extermination occurred, catching *thousands* of demons by surprise, Vox saw his moment and started plotting.

That first Extermination had been *terrifying*. No one had expected that many angels to descend upon them. Vox had been striking a deal with a new, naive, blockheaded sinner when he’d heard the first round of screams. He had watched angels tear into sinners without mercy

and he had quickly taken to the lights, dragging Valentino into the safety of the studio before he could venture outside to see what was happening.

He would never admit to searching the city CCTV during that first Extermination, frantically scouring Pentagram City for a glimpse of a red coat. Neither would he admit to the relief that overwhelmed him when he spotted Alastor's distorted image making a hasty retreat to Rosie's Emporium.

He was supposed to hate the bastard, but after every Extermination, Vox found himself restless until his cameras caught sight of the Radio Demon.

Clearing his mind, he steeled himself as he entered the visitor's building. A slim hellhound with rich chocolate fur and long fluffy ears greeted him with a neutral expression.

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Name?"

"Vox. CEO and owner of VoxTek. I have an appointment with Her Majesty at two."

The hellhound glanced at her list and wrote something upon it before nodding. She pressed a buzzer and another hellhound strode out of the back room. He was decidedly bigger than she was, with more scars around his muzzle.

Vox smiled amiably at him.

"Escort Mr. Vox to Her Majesty's office," said the first hellhound.

Vox followed the beefy hound in silence, paying careful attention to the art that lined the walls of the building they entered. One could tell a lot about a person by their taste in art.

The art here was composed of bright colours and calming landscapes. Occasionally there was a photo of the king and queen speaking with smiling sinners, or hosting dinners, but eventually the king became absent from these photos, leaving only the queen and her people.

The last painting before they reached the office depicted a battle scene of angels descending into Hell, spears and blades at the ready as bloodied demons snarled or scrambled for cover. It looked out of place amongst the other artwork.

“Take a seat,” grunted the hellhound. “The queen will be with you shortly.”

Vox took a seat behind a rather ornate mahogany desk and waited. He didn’t have to wait long before Queen Lilith swept into the room and he bounced to his feet and bowed.

“Sit, Victor.”

His brain stalled at the use of his human name and it took him a moment to settle back into his seat.

“Vox,” he corrected quietly and she offered him a polite smile.

“Very well, Vox. I believe you have a proposal for me?”

He plastered on a disarming grin, recovering quickly from the false start. “Yes, Your Majesty.” He glanced through the office window, at the last painting in the corridor. “A potential end to the suffering of sinners. Perhaps even a chance at paradise.”

She regarded him closely. “Are you not an Overlord, Vox? Are you not a cause of such suffering? Exactly how many souls do you possess?”

His smile faltered for the briefest of moments and he flicked his gaze to the painting once more. "I was actually referring to the Exterminations..."

She blinked slowly at him and Vox suddenly realised that perhaps the queen wasn't as forgiving as she made herself out to be to the public. He pushed on and hoped he hadn't misjudged her too severely.

"We could put an end to them," he said quickly. "We could show the angels that sinners are capable of *change*. That they are as deserving of happiness and paradise as angels themselves are."

It was horseshit and Vox knew it. Once a sinner, always a sinner. Demons weren't capable of change and happiness would always evade them - he had learned that the hard way. None of them would escape the pain and misery of Hell.

...But Queen Lilith *believed* in them. She had spent centuries trying to rally them together, encouraging them to stand strong and show the angels what they were capable of - it was the whole reason the Extermination had begun; Heaven was *afraid*.

However, Vox knew that Queen Lilith's plan was doomed to fail. Demons were cowards and degenerates. They were *evil*. They weren't capable of working together and after the Exterminations, there was no chance they would stand together and fight, which was exactly what Vox was banking on.

Queen Lilith tipped her head curiously and Vox tried not to smirk. He leaned forwards with an enthusiastic grin.

"Picture this," he said in his best presenting voice. "A chance for sinners to redeem themselves. We could televise it - turn it into a reality show to raise curiosity. The whole thing could take place in a hotel, where sinners have so many weeks to prove they can change. We could show the angels the footage and maybe it'll be enough for them to cease their attacks? You could lead it if you like? You and His Majesty. Or I can direct if you'd prefer?"

The queen stared at Vox for a long moment and Vox smiled easily at her. She was intrigued, he could see that much. Finally, she nodded, albeit slowly.

“That... could work.”

It wouldn't. Vox didn't care about the hotel though; it was merely an excuse to get close to the royal family, namely Lucifer. Lilith was a stepping stone.

Vox slid a stack of paperwork out of his briefcase. “Let me talk you through the plan.”

When the first Extermination occurred, Alastor had been making his way home from Cannibal Town. He watched two angels land on the outskirts of the town and when they had torn three cannibals in half with their blades, dread gripped Alastor's chest and he turned tail and fled towards Rosie's Emporium to warn her.

She would likely be furious at the feeling of her people's souls being permanently extinguished. Alastor needed to stop her from rallying the other cannibals into a battle they couldn't win.

Another Overlord crept into his mind - one he hadn't spoken to in *years* - yet he couldn't help the fear that rolled around his gut at the idea of his permanent demise. He could only hope that Vox had found safety.

The following Exterminations passed in a similar fashion, with Alastor hiding away, then checking on Rosie (and giving Husk's chain a little tug to ensure he was also alive - sue him, he'd grown fond of the grumpy cat these past years), before finally trying to figure out whether Vox had survived without outright marching up to his studio. He knew he was being ridiculous, checking on a man that despised him, but then he noticed how the city's CCTV cameras would track his movements after every Extermination, and suddenly, he found himself breaking the magic that kept him hidden from video - even if only for a few minutes.

He even winked at the cameras once or twice, knowing it would piss Vox off as much as it would reassure him.

Other than the Exterminations however, Alastor's afterlife had become... rather dull. Monotonous. Repetitive.

He recorded his radio show, made deals with naive, damned souls, he met with Rosie - always a delight, of course - and... that was it.

The Voice hadn't called upon him for *years*. He wasn't free, but he wasn't *collecting* for her either. The chain around his throat was practically decorative at this point.

He missed Vox.

The thought would hit him in his loneliest moments and it was like a knife to the chest every time. He had tried to contact Vox after their fight, had tried to apologise, to explain himself, but each of his attempts fell flat and Vox would either flee or threaten to attack him.

It occurred to Alastor that Vox was *afraid* of him. The thought made him nauseous.

The angrier Vox became with him, the more strained Alastor's smile grew until, eventually, Alastor stopped trying to make amends. He came to accept that the thing between them was well and truly broken. Forever.

He was incredibly tired. He had never noticed before.

"You have a lot of nerve showing your face around here, Radio Demon."

Alastor paused, glancing up from the street and setting his gaze on a narrow-eyed Valentino.

“Excuse me?” Alastor asked irritably. He couldn’t say he was mourning the loss of Vox’s *pet* as much as Vox himself.

“The Entertainment District is Vox’s domain,” Valentino hissed. “You’d do well to remember that.”

Alastor raised an eyebrow, smile sharpening a fraction. “I’m in no mood for such childish games, Valentino. Best be on your way now.”

A crowd was gathering, curious passers-by starting to linger and watch the drama unfold. Alastor just wanted to get home.

Valentino bared his teeth. “The Television Demon won’t take kindly to you trespassing in his territory.”

Territory? Since when did Vox give a crap about territories? Was Valentino looking to cause a fight or was Vox proving a point? Trying to make a name for himself by *challenging* the Radio Demon?

Either way, Alastor wasn’t interested. He rolled his eyes and carried on down the street.

A bullet tore through his shoulder.

He hissed and rounded on Valentino, commanding his shadows to coil around the snarling moth-demon and throw him against the closest building. Valentino yelped as he lost grip of his gun and slumped onto the floor, and Alastor glowered at him in disdain, holding his bloodied shoulder.

“Well, that was *stupid*, ” he growled and no sooner had he finished his sentence when Valentino slipped a second gun out of his coat and fired it into Alastor’s stomach.

Alastor staggered backwards with a gasp, clasping a hand over the fresh wound as he ordered his shadows to tear the weapon from Valentino's grip before wrapping around his throat and dragging him through the street. Valentino cried out and Alastor gritted his teeth and hurled him into another building before letting the shadowy tendrils ruthlessly pelt his body.

A frequency clashed with his suddenly, and Alastor didn't have time to turn around before a clawed hand was around his throat, another against his wounded shoulder, pumping far too many volts into him.

Vox released him and Alastor collapsed with wide eyes, paralysed for a moment as all of his muscles hyperextended at the assault. He stared up at Vox, shocked, and Vox scowled down at him for a moment before his gaze caught on the blood stain that was growing rapidly over Alastor's shirt.

Vox's scowl deepened and Alastor cried out, tensing once more as the Television Demon dug his claws into his wounded stomach and poured more electricity into him.

Alastor was sluggish at commanding his shadows to pull Vox away from him, and when Vox next looked at Alastor, his eye swirled hypnotically.

"Stay down," he growled and Alastor was helpless to resist. He panted, ears low as fear blossomed in his chest.

He didn't *know* this Vox. He didn't know what this Vox would do to him.

Hypnotic gaze in full effect, Vox backed towards the battered Valentino and picked him up rather effortlessly before simply walking away from Alastor.

Alastor stared after him from the floor, eyes wide and tail standing to attention.

He felt sick.

He felt heartbroken.

He felt *furious*.

One of the crowd dared to snicker. He snarled and wrapped his shadows around them - a ferret-demon of some sort - and he dragged them back to his radio tower with an inhuman screech of rage, broadcasting their screams across all of Hell as a warning before he *devoured* them.

Vox hoped that he had cauterised Alastor's wounds well enough to stop him from bleeding out.

He shouldn't have cared. He should have *let* Alastor bleed out - one less problem to worry about, after all. He should have *enjoyed* Alastor's pain and fear.

But he didn't.

The only reason he had attacked Alastor was to save Valentino's ass.

He dumped Valentino on the bed unceremoniously.

"What the *fuck* is wrong with you?" he snarled at Valentino and the moth-demon at least had the decency to grimace.

"I just... I saw him and I got angry," Valentino mumbled and sparks danced between Vox's antennae.

“So you *challenged* him? You know how powerful he is! I wouldn’t have been able to beat him if I hadn’t caught him off-guard.”

Valentino frowned, lip curling into a sneer before he glared at Vox. “If it wasn’t for him, you’d be free.”

The fight drained from Vox and after a moment, he sighed. “He could have killed you. You’d have lost everything; your power, your Overlord status... It might take you *weeks* to regenerate after he’s finished with you.”

Valentino looked away moodily. “Should have shot him in the head.”

Vox’s heart twisted unexpectedly and he scowled before gripping Valentino’s chin firmly and forcing him to meet his gaze. “You don’t challenge him again, you hear me? You stay away from him.”

Valentino blinked in surprise before baring his teeth at Vox and shoving at him.

Vox watched him march towards the door. “I’m trying to protect you,” he grumbled and Valentino cast him a withering look.

“You’re trying to protect *him*. ”

He slammed the door.

Later, Vox would find a smashed photo frame in his room - the one he had taken years ago from Alastor’s empty home, the one that lay forgotten behind Alastor’s bedroom door, the one that he had hidden away and kept secret.

The picture of him and Alastor would be torn in half, and Vox would sink to the floor and hold the broken image of his past to his chest.

And he would weep over everything he had lost.

Chapter End Notes

Another time skip! Not long now before Alastor takes his little... sabbatical...

Also, I just wanted to thank you all for your comments - you have no idea how much they make me smile and how much they motivate me to write more for this fic (hence why it has far surpassed its original goal of 60k words XD)

Also, also! If people are looking for a little comfort break during all this angst, the wonderful and insanely talented *AislinCeivun* has drawn some 'future' fanart here:
<https://www.tumblr.com/aislinceivun/758922965917319168/i-know-im-getting-ahead-of-the-fic-but-if>
<https://bsky.app/profile/ais4horn.bsky.social/post/3lffln6vabs24>

Chapter 33: Crash And Burn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Construction for Vox's hotel was well underway. He had found a run-down, abandoned hotel near the city centre and had laid out his plans for refurbishment. Queen Lilith loved the idea and approved the plans and Vox was suddenly a step closer to breaking free of his chain, of putting an end to the *collections* and midnight fights with other Overlords. An end to dragging unconscious bodies back to the bookshop for his master to feast upon.

As the hotel was being shaped, Vox and Lilith discussed how they would go about filming and enticing sinners to take part in their experiment.

Vox began to enjoy his monthly meetings with the queen, although they reminded him of his discussions with Alastor in days gone by - of radio broadcasting and television shows and other long-forgotten frivolities.

Still, the queen warmed to him. She called him bright-spirited and ambitious (not unlike Alastor once had) and Vox's smile widened even as his heart ached. He enjoyed her company - she was stern but kind, regal but generous, intelligent but patient. She was motherly in some ways and she was fiercely protective of her people.

He almost forgot that Lucifer was the end goal.

They created plans and scripts and equipment lists and they assessed how construction was coming along as Vox rallied a camera crew and video editors and sound crews and lighting crews. It took a while but eventually, they were almost ready to advertise to sinners.

And then Lucifer joined them.

At first, he didn't say anything, merely observed from the sidelines as Vox and Lilith chatted about the *Happy Hotel* - a name Lilith had jokingly used before it (unfortunately, in Vox's humble opinion) stuck. Soon, Lilith coaxed Lucifer into discussions and he pitched in every

so often, looking sceptical. It happened naturally, with no pushing from Vox and it wasn't long before Lucifer seemed to take a real interest in their plans.

There was something strained about Lucifer and Lilith's relationship, Vox could tell. However, as sinners took an interest in the hotel, reaching out about the advertisements Vox televised, the tension between them seemed to... ease a fraction. Lucifer's smile was a little looser and Lilith wasn't quite so stiff around him.

With the hotel finished and the television crew ready and sinners intrigued by the show, Vox commenced filming.

The king and queen sat on the sidelines, watching everything unfold, and Vox was surprised to see so many demons *wanting* to be redeemed. The Exterminations had obviously frightened them.

The show was broadcasted as reality television, and thousands of sinners tuned in each week to watch the experiment. It made for great television - fighting, drama, comedy, and competition all rolled into one fresh, new show. Vox's ratings *skyrocketed*.

But he didn't care about the ratings.

He cared about the suddenly hopeful smile that had appeared on Lucifer's face.

Time to strike.

"Enjoying the show, Your Majesty?" Vox whispered as they watched the hotel residents reveal to one another what their Earthly sins had been. Two of the sinners appeared to know each other from their human lives and it had created a fair bit of tension on the show so far. It was these two that Lucifer appeared most interested in.

He nodded slowly, offering a small smile to Vox. "Y'know, I wasn't sure about all this. In fact, I'd pretty much given up hope on you sinners, but this hotel..." He glanced around it

fondly. "...I think we have a real shot with this."

Vox's smile faltered at the sincerity in his tone and he turned back to the hotel residents before the king could catch his expression. He felt dirty all of a sudden.

"Yeah," he said quietly, restraining a frown. "Yeah, me too."

The king eyed him and Vox averted his gaze further.

"You're a good candidate for redemption yourself," said the king gently. "You had a rough life. Personally, I think it was unfair that you ended up down here."

Vox startled and whipped around to face him, antennae sparking. "What do you mean?"

Lucifer smiled sadly. "Good and Evil isn't so black and white. One bad deed doesn't make you worthy of Hell, just as one good deed doesn't make you worthy of Heaven. The universe works in shades of grey; every little decision you make, every action, every word... it alters that shade of grey in your soul. The lighter your soul, the better your chances of getting into Heaven."

Lucifer dropped his gaze to Vox's chest. "Your soul was one shade too dark for Heaven."

Vox's eyes widened, breath catching.

Lucifer shook his head, mouth a thin line. "The thing is, judgement is subjective, isn't it? You hit someone and that automatically makes your soul darker, steal and that's another shade darker... but what if you hit someone because they're threatening your wife with a gun? What if you steal a loaf of stale bread because you can't afford to feed your kids? The universe doesn't take context into account."

Vox licked his lips, staring at the side of Lucifer's head in shock.

“You were always going to be disadvantaged,” Lucifer sighed before he met Vox’s gaze. “Abusive parents, peer pressure from your friends, born in an era where you had to hide who you loved... You never stood a chance.”

Vox’s heart clenched and his stomach rolled. He had been destined for Hell from the start.

“I don’t know much about your afterlife,” said Lucifer quietly. “A record of your human life is made once you enter Hell, but after that, I lose track of you... but you seem like a *good man*, Vox. You’ve certainly impressed my wife with all of your elaborate plans to save sinners. If anyone deserves redemption, it’s you.”

Vox swallowed and guilt gnawed at his gut. “I don’t,” he murmured.

Lucifer grinned lop-sidedly at him and somehow the expression made Vox feel worse.

“You do,” said Lucifer simply before he turned his attention back to the hotel residents.

Vox stared miserably at the cameras. Now or never. This was his chance.

“Then perhaps you could do me a favour?” he murmured as shame filled his throat.

Lucifer arched an eyebrow at him.

Vox tapped his neck slowly. “I was tricked into a deal. Simple but impossible to weasel my way out of. Thing is, she changed the terms at the last moment and I signed something I never agreed to. I was wondering if you could... uh... ask her to destroy the contract?” he lied.

Lucifer frowned. “I’m sorry, Vox. I don’t interfere in soul contracts between sinners. I can’t be seen to take sides.”

Vox nodded, thinking quickly. He looked down. “Yeah, I kinda expected that to be honest. Just hoped... Well, it was worth a shot. Shame this’ll be my last time on set. I’ve grown pretty fond of the hotel.”

Lucifer’s gaze snapped to him. “Pardon me?”

Vox offered him a weak smile. “My *master* doesn’t like how well my ratings are doing. She thinks I’m building power too quickly. She wants me to shut down the hotel but I don’t want people to lose their chance at redemption so I’m in talks to sell the show to... ah... Dolby.”

He suppressed a shudder as he said it. He couldn’t stand the other show-stealing media Overlord.

Lucifer scowled and turned to face Vox fully. “Now, hold on a second. You can’t do that. You’re the whole reason this place is successful.”

Vox shrugged and his skin crawled. “It is what it is. I made a deal, I’ve got to face the consequences.”

Lucifer pursed his lips. “...Look, maybe I can have a talk with her. What’s her name? Where can I find her?”

Vox scrambled for a name.

“Her name is Roo,” he said, watching the king’s expression carefully for any hint of mistrust, and when there was none, he continued.

“She works in a bookshop.”

“...Are you sure she’s in here?” Lucifer asked slowly as he frowned at the dark bookshop.

Vox swallowed and nodded. “Yes.”

Lucifer pushed inside and the lights flickered to life. “Neat trick,” he murmured before he started towards the maze of bookcases.

The lock clicked behind them and Vox winced as Lucifer glanced back at him curiously.

The lights dimmed then brightened and a cool breeze swept around the shop.

“I’m sorry,” Vox whispered as he lingered beside the door and Lucifer shot him a sharp look before the lights blew out again.

“Hello again, Serpent,” said a hushed voice and Lucifer stiffened before fixing Vox with a fiery gaze.

“I trusted you,” he hissed, horns rising from his skull and Vox ducked his head, backing away from the enraged archangel.

“I’m sorry,” Vox said again, uselessly.

“You will be, sinner,” Lucifer snarled as a flame blossomed within his palm and Vox’s eyes widened before he leapt for cover, Lucifer’s fire scorching the wall where he had been standing moments ago.

“Stand and face me, coward,” Lucifer roared as Vox scrambled behind a bookcase and crawled between the maze of shelves, fear causing his fans to flick on.

Lucifer grunted. “Unhand me!” he hissed and there was the sound of struggling and books falling off shelves, and the air in the shop grew cooler as the wind picked up speed.

A few seconds later, the lights switched on and the shop fell silent.

Vox slowly picked himself up off the floor and waited, listening for any signs of movement before carefully peering around the shelves to where Lucifer had been standing.

He was alone.

Vox swallowed and touched his neck. “I did what you asked,” he whispered. “I brought him to you.”

No response.

Vox felt nauseous. He clenched his fists. “A deal’s a deal. Release me.”

Silence.

Vox’s skin prickled with heat. She had to hold up her end of the bargain. She *had* to.

“I’ve fulfilled my end of the contract,” he growled. “Break my chain.”

The room grew warmer and the lights dimmed again as a strange sort of pressure built within the bookshop. Suddenly, the lightbulbs shattered along with the windows and anything else

made of glass, and the door unlocked itself before the whole room started to tremble as though an Earthquake was about to strike.

Vox gasped and threw himself through a broken window, scurrying into the street when Lucifer, in all of his angelic glory, reappeared with a snarl, snapping the black ethereal chains that tried to snake around his body. He writhed and struggled, tugging at the chains as he bared his teeth, and suddenly he released them and flew out of the bookshop with a furious growl.

He hovered above the bookshop, lifted a hand, and the whole building burst into flames.

Vox hid in the next alley, watching in horror as the bookshop crumbled to ash.

Once the building had been wiped from existence, Lucifer soared towards the hotel.

Vox stared hollowly at the letter on his desk.

Lucifer had destroyed the hotel.

His administrative team had also sent Vox a personal, handwritten letter sealed with red wax. It read:

For the attention of Vox,

Should you approach any member of the royal family, or step within a five mile radius of the palace again, you will be captured and presented to Heaven for immediate Extermination.

On behalf of His Majesty,

Lucifer

Vox curled his fingers gently around the chain at his throat. He had failed.

His soul belonged to her, for all eternity. He would collect demons for her for the rest of his miserable existence. He would have to keep fighting other Overlords. He would have to grow his power exponentially if he was to survive.

His screen glitched and a hoarse sob wracked out of his throat before he let his head fall into his hands.

There was no escape.

Change was inevitable. As the decades passed, Hell crawled into an era of modernity that Alastor couldn't say he particularly enjoyed.

A princess had been born, although this did nothing to hold her parents' relationship together and even the most idiotic of sinners could see that Lucifer had become more withdrawn and depressed, whereas Lilith had become colder and more vicious.

Their relationship clearly hadn't been stable for decades, but the destruction of Vox's hotel had kick-started something. Alastor could only wonder what had got into Vox to make him start that silly hotel business in the first place. Redemption didn't seem like something the Television Demon would be interested in.

Fashions changed, new sinners grew even more disrespectful and loud-mouthed, technology advanced, and Alastor found himself scrapping with Valentino and Vox more often than he would have liked. They were always short altercations, mostly territorial disputes - and he couldn't believe that there were parts of the Entertainment District that he was no longer allowed to visit - but sometimes they pushed each other's buttons too far and they would both find themselves limping home.

Alastor pretended he had hardened himself to Vox's cruelty. He smiled wider, held his head higher, twirled his cane around and spoke with a sense of flippancy and arrogance that he knew would irritate Vox as well as every other Overlord he clashed with.

Vox had changed so much that he didn't recognise the man. He'd even changed his head to one of those new, fandangled flatscreen pictureboxes. Alastor wanted to hate it as much as he hated every other piece of modern technology, but the truth was that the higher definition gave him a clearer picture of Vox's expressions.

Not that Alastor saw anything but fury and loathing in Vox's expression these days. The man had become practically *volatile*.

And then there was the new suit.

Vox looked good in a suit. Smart. *Powerful*. The first time that Alastor had seen him on television in a suit, he had nearly dropped his tea over his lap. He had admired suits in the past, but he had never admired the man *wearing* them. Something hot had stirred in his stomach and Alastor had no interest in figuring out what it was or what to do with it, so he had turned the television off and muttered to himself that television rotted the brain. He had unplugged it for good measure.

So, it was 2016, Hell had changed a lot, Vox had changed a lot, Valentino had grown a little army of *whores* which he paraded around on television as well as the streets, there was a sixteen-year-old princess wreaking havoc in the palace, and Alastor just wished things would stop moving so damn *fast*.

The only place that remained familiar to him these days was Cannibal Town, and that was where he spent most of his days.

Until, for the first time in nearly half a century, there was a gentle tug on his chain.

He was chatting to Rosie over afternoon tea when it happened, and his face drained of colour. This time, he really did spill tea over his lap.

He stood with a hiss and Rosie watched in alarm, using her napkin to dab at his soiled clothes.

“Are you alright, dear?” she asked worriedly.

He stared at her with wide eyes and touched his throat. Had he imagined it?

He was abruptly dragged into the table by an invisible force and Rosie gasped as he quickly steadied himself and her wobbling fine china tea cups.

Rosie met his gaze in horror and he swallowed. “I... I’m afraid I must go,” he said quietly. “Thank you for this afternoon, my dear.”

“Alastor,” Rosie breathed and it wasn’t often that he saw fear upon her features but today he did. He tipped his head a little.

“I’ll see you soon,” he said gently before standing tall and strolling out of her emporium.

He paused upon realising that the bookshop had been destroyed. After a moment’s hesitation, he headed towards the old pile of rubble anyway and once he reached it, he looked around curiously at the empty street.

Lucifer had condemned this street years ago and now it was a ghost town, with decaying, rat-infested buildings and lighting that no longer worked.

“You called?” he asked with a sarcastic smile as he clasped his hands behind his back. He wondered if he would be able to hear her now that the bookshop was gone, or whether the location itself was a weak point between her world and his.

“I require your services.”

The tone was quieter. Colder. But it was her voice.

Alastor tilted his head. “Oh? Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“Vox has failed.”

Alastor’s smile faltered. “Failed what?” He felt as though someone had thrown a bucket of ice over him.

“You will not be such a disappointment. I will make sure of it.”

Alastor stepped back. “...Failed *what?*”

“Lucifer will be impossible to approach, but his daughter is half-angel. She is naive. You will bring her to me.”

Confusion danced over Alastor’s expression. “What are you talking about?”

“Vox failed because he is weak. Soft. *Fragile*. I’ll learn from my mistakes. I’ll harden you up. I’ll train you. Mould you into an obedient soldier.”

She sounded demented. Alastor scrambled frantically away from the pile of rubble.

The chain yanked him back and he was suddenly swallowed by icy darkness.

Chapter End Notes

I smell a 7 year time skip ;)

So, here it is folks! The jump into modern day! Shorter chapter but an important one.

And I promise I'll reply to all of your comments over the past couple of chapters!

Chapter 34: A Seven Year Sabbatical

Chapter Notes

Warnings at the bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Are they gone?” Valentino asked quietly and Vox ignored him in favour of frantically scouring the city’s CCTV.

He wasn’t there.

“Is it over?”

Vox’s fans worked faster as his gaze darted from monitor to monitor.

Where was he?

“Vox, have they left?”

Vox’s breaths came harder and sparks jumped between his antennae.

He always survived. Always.

“Vox, are you listening to me?” Valentino snapped, tearing Vox away from his monitors and Vox startled and instinctively flinched from Valentino’s touch; decades of rough treatment in bed making him tense in preparation for a punishment.

Valentino scowled and released him and Vox grimaced at his own cowardice.

“Yeah, the angels are gone,” he muttered before returning his attention to his monitors and cycling through the city’s CCTV once more.

From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Valentino clenching his fists.

“What are you looking for?”

Vox frowned and ignored him, leaning closer to his screens.

“What are you looking for, Vox?”

“Nothing,” Vox grumbled and suddenly, Valentino swung him around and slammed him against the console with a snarl.

“You’re a fucking liar,” Valentino spat, wrapping a hand around Vox’s throat. “You’re looking for *him*.”

Vox bristled and sent a warning burst of charge through Valentino, making the moth-demon wince. “Get the fuck off me,” Vox growled.

“You’re *obsessed* with him,” Valentino sneered, trapping his wrists against the console. “It’s pathetic.”

Vox bared his teeth and his eye swirled hypnotically. “Let me go.”

Valentino fought the command and quickly crushed their mouths together, forcing his tongue past Vox’s lips. Vox barely put up a fight; this was an old dance of theirs.

He could feel arousal blossoming from Valentino's drugged saliva.

"You're *mine*," Valentino snarled against his mouth and Vox poured current through Valentino's body until the moth-demon hissed in pain.

"Go stick your cock in one of your little whores," Vox whispered. "Unlike me, they're contractually obligated to enjoy it."

Valentino tensed and leaned back slightly to glower at Vox. Vox met his glare.

"They don't mean anything to me. You know that. You know I love you," Valentino said angrily and Vox curled his mouth in disgust.

Ever since he had learned of how Valentino had forced Angel Dust into a soul-binding contract with him - and the terms of said contract - Vox's trust and respect for Valentino had withered. And Valentino knew it. Nowadays they were at each other's throats as often as they were in each other's beds.

"You've never loved anyone but yourself," Vox growled and Valentino stiffened before narrowing his eyes and raking one of his lower sets of claws down Vox's chest, breaking the skin.

"At least I'm not somebody else's worthless *bitch*," Valentino snarled and Vox jerked his knee into Valentino's crotch, making the moth-demon grunt.

The console edge pressed uncomfortably into Vox's spine. "Either fuck me and get it over with, or *leave*," Vox snapped, unwilling to admit to himself how much Valentino's words stung.

Valentino pulled a face, looking wounded for a moment, before he gritted his teeth and whirled Vox around. He bent him over the console and Vox braced himself as Valentino slid his trousers halfway down his thighs and spat into his hole as though his saliva passed as lubrication. Then he rammed into Vox, wrapping his arms tightly around him as he buried his face into Vox's shoulder.

Vox's gaze flicked once more to the monitors, searching.

"You're supposed to be mine," Valentino whispered after a few moments and he sounded genuinely distraught. "You're supposed to hate him. He *broke* you. I've always been here for you."

Vox scowled at the monitors, fingers curling into the edge of the console as his hips jarred against cold metal with every thrust.

"You helped to break me," Vox said quietly, firmly, and Valentino flinched before one of his lower hands wrapped around Vox's cock and pumped it roughly.

"I never meant to."

Vox let his eyes slip shut, a lump forming in his throat. "You fuck other people behind my back and can't look at me naked. You don't love me, Val."

Valentino held him tighter. "I do. I always have. You're too cold and distant to notice." He kissed Vox's neck slowly. "You're too obsessed with *him* to notice. But he's never going to love you, Vox. He's never going to give you what you want."

Vox clamped his mouth shut and focused on the pain of Valentino shoving into him ruthlessly.

"I'm not obsessed with him," Vox murmured. "I hate him."

“You pretend to,” Valentino whispered before he bit down on Vox’s neck.

Vox hissed, relishing the sting. “You’ve seen us fight.”

“You look for him after every Extermination,” Valentino pointed out and Vox instinctively glanced at the monitors, anxiety filling his chest. *He wasn’t there...*

In all honesty, Vox hadn’t seen Alastor in *months*, but the Radio Demon always appeared on one of his cameras after every Extermination with an infuriating wink or sly smirk or, or-

Vox felt lightheaded. He watched his own tears drip onto the console.

What if Alastor was dead? Killed permanently by an angelic weapon?

His heart twisted painfully and his stomach rolled.

Valentino paused. “Are you... crying?” he asked incredulously and Vox hurried to wipe the tears away, to get rid of the evidence of his frustrating feelings for Alastor - feelings that should never have existed.

“You’re crying over him?” Valentino hissed before gripping Vox’s antenna and smashing his face into the console. Vox’s screen glitched and a spider web of cracks spread from the top left corner. “Asshole!” Valentino snarled and Vox managed to lever himself a few inches off the console.

“Are you done yet?” he asked coolly and Valentino growled again before bending Vox’s antenna.

Vox cried out in pain and Valentino came inside him before squeezing Vox's dick harshly to stop him from doing the same. Vox made a strained noise and Valentino pulled out of him before grabbing him by the damaged antenna and tossing him carelessly to the floor.

"Fuck you," Valentino spat and he stomped a heeled boot against Vox's achingly hard cock.

Vox doubled over with an agonised cry, whimpering when Valentino toed at his cock, rubbing his boot against it before practically standing on him again, and Vox humped his boot desperately before coming with a pained whine.

He immediately drew his knees to his chest as Valentino glowered down at him in disdain.

"You're a pathetic piece of shit, Vox," Valentino said before tucking himself back in and stalking away, antennae low and wings quivering with anger and hurt.

The door slammed shut and Vox glanced down at the unsightly, shameful mess between his legs. He grimaced at the bruising spreading across his skin.

He touched his damaged antenna and flinched at the sharp pain.

He wrapped his arms around his legs and pressed his cracked face into his knees.

Seven years passed.

Seven years of absolute *hell*.

Alastor's smile was wide and slightly deranged as he knocked on the door of what had once been the *Happy Hotel*.

He changed the name before he even stepped up to the porch.

The young princess opened the door and his smile sharpened.

“Alastor! Pleasure to be meeting you, sweetheart! Quite a pleasure...”

Vox fished through the drawers, only half listening to Valentino. He knew the moth-demon kept a pistol in his desk somewhere and after the outburst about Angel, Vox thought it better to remove all possibility of Valentino storming up to the hotel and causing a scene.

His fans whirled a little louder as they attempted to clear Valentino’s toxic smoke from his systems. He was certain that Valentino had picked up smoking again merely to watch him suffer.

“The Radio Demon is there.”

Charge crackled over Vox’s frame as he suddenly turned all of his attention to that one sentence.

“...What did you just say?” he asked with a strained grin as a thousand thoughts and emotions flew through his head.

Valentino smirked in amusement and Vox wanted to hit him. “You heard me.”

“Alastor came back,” said Vox slowly, “and he is with Lucifer’s *daughter*, and that wasn’t the *first fucking thing you told me?*”

Valentino jerked backwards at his anger, looking genuinely afraid for a brief moment before he ducked out of Vox's hold with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"Hey, killing Alastor is your *kink*." He sauntered over to the screens above his desk and flipped one on and Vox wanted to strangle him when his smirk refused to falter.

Vox appeared in front of the screen with bared teeth.

He watched Alastor fight a serpentine sinner and his breath hitched. He looked exactly as Vox remembered him, only his smile was sharper and there was something wild behind his gaze.

He wasn't afraid to flaunt his power either. It was almost theatrical the way he battered the foolish snake.

Vox glowered at the distorted image of Alastor on his monitors and barely heard Valentino addressing him. "That fucker is back."

"I thought he was gone for good too," Valentino said sarcastically.

"It's been *seven years*," Vox snarled.

Seven years of radio silence.

Seven years of letting Vox believe he was dead.

Seven years of utter hell between Roo and Valentino.

He was going to knock that infuriating smirk off Alastor's face. He was going to make Alastor *hurt*. He was going to torture Alastor for everything he had done to him, for *abandoning* him.

Things had changed a lot since Alastor had left. *Vox* had changed a lot. He no longer had patience for distractions like Alastor and he would kill the Radio Demon like he killed every other arrogant sinner that dared cross him.

He sent a message to all of Pentagram City, to the *Radio Demon*, about who was running this hellhole.

And then, Alastor did something unexpected.

He rose to Vox's challenge.

"Salutations. Good to be back on the air."

Cocky, egotistical bastard. How *dare* he act like he'd simply had a break from broadcasting. How dare he think he could come back where he left off. How dare he think that he was still *in charge*, that he was still the most powerful Overlord in Pentagram City.

Still, Vox had lost his breath for a moment. He hadn't heard that voice directed at him in so long and every single memory he had tried to suppress came flooding back to him, drowning him, catching him off-guard.

But something was wrong. Vox apparently wasn't the only one who had changed.

Alastor's tone was as sharp as his smile and there was a cutting edge to his words. His gaze was narrow and the insults came thick and fast and something truly furious and pained stirred in Vox's chest.

Clout-chasing, mediocre, video-podcast.

Insecure.

Every day he's got a new format.

He'd be powerless without the other Vees.

What the fuck? What was Alastor's problem? Vox wasn't the one who had left! Vox wasn't the one who had ruined everything!

"And here's the sugar on the cream, he asked me to join his team. I said *no* and now he's pissy, that's the tea!"

Charge crackled over Vox's frame in shock. That... That wasn't what had happened. Alastor was twisting things, making it seem like he was *above* Vox. As though Vox had come to him in desperation, begging for his help. As though Vox was a joke to him.

Vox had gone to Purgatory because of Alastor and Alastor was acting like it was all a fun game to him.

"You old-timey prick! I'll show you suffering!" he snarled and perhaps he revealed a little too much of his own hurt - of how he'd felt these past years, but Alastor casually dismissed him, cruel and callous and *mocking*.

"Uh oh, the TV is buffering!"

Rage boiled over. "I'll de-destroy you-ou-ou-" He felt his systems overheat before the warnings had a chance to ping onto his screen and suddenly, his vision went black - as did the entirety of Pentagram City.

Well, except for Vox's monitors and Alastor's run-down radio tower.

He rebooted and Alastor's smiling face filled his screens to deliver a message for Vox's audio inputs only.

A thinly-veiled *threat*.

He watched Alastor twist and grow into something grotesque and dangerous and *untouchable*. And when he laughed, Vox's head filled with memories of a time he had tried desperately to forget.

Alastor was as beautiful as he remembered.

The screens powered down and he stared into the darkness for an entire minute.

"...Fuck."

Rosie hid her shock well when Alastor took the seat beside her. However, when Carmilla started the meeting, she sent him a wide-eyed look and Alastor's unnerving grin never wavered.

Vox's new business partner was an intriguing little thing.

She was a firecracker with no respect for her elders but she had certainly done well for herself in what little time she had been in Hell. She was observant too. Alastor would remember that.

When Rosie subtly touched his shoulder towards the end of the meeting, he cracked his neck and almost bit her hand off.

She recoiled quickly and Alastor could see that she had questions but, despite his own teasing about his 'sabbatical', he was in no mood to discuss it. He'd had quite enough excitement for this week.

Enough memories.

It didn't skip his notice that Vox was absent from the meeting. He wasn't sure how to feel about it but after everything he had faced in Purgatory and after their little duel earlier, perhaps it was for the best that they steered clear of one another.

At least whilst he did what he had been instructed to do.

As he made his way back to the hotel, clutching his cane far too tightly as though it was some sort of lifeline, he stumbled across a billboard with Vox's face on it and his heart twisted.

He swallowed and stared at Vox's shark-like grin.

Has-been. Loser. Fossil. Coward.

Did anybody miss him? Did anybody notice?

He rolled Vox's angry words over in his mind again and again, squeezing his cane tighter.

Vox despised him. Had threatened him.

I'll destroy you.

Alastor kept his ears upright and his smile remained wide with its new, painful stitches.

If only Vox knew that he already had.

The weeks rolled by and Alastor settled into his role as hotelier. He observed the residents, learned their fears and wants and stored the information away for later dissection. He met Lucifer and figured out how to push his buttons and his plans for the princess were slightly derailed by His Majesty's appearance, but it was nothing that Alastor couldn't work around.

After all, Charlie was becoming desperate to save her people and desperate people made stupid mistakes. All Alastor had to do was bide his time.

The irony of the situation was not lost on him. Charlie revealed that she found her mother's old plans for a 'hotel of redemption' and thought they were worth a shot. It was a while before she realised that the reason sinners were sceptical about the hotel was because it had already been attempted decades earlier.

Still, Charlie believed in the hotel.

Alastor did not. He wished Charlie had picked another establishment to carry out her plans for redemption - like a café or a mental facility. It made him uneasy to think that he was following in Vox's footsteps.

At least he wasn't televising the ridiculous affair.

He really should visit Rosie. He'd put it off long enough.

She would have questions for him. Questions he didn't want to answer.

He sighed and twirled his cane around before heading for Cannibal Town. He skirted around the Entertainment District and glimpsed the border of Cannibal Town, then blinked in surprise when he spotted Rosie already walking towards him with a thick scowl.

"It's about time," she growled and he straightened, grinning at her charmingly.

"I take it my presence was missed?" he teased and Rosie's face crumpled in anger before her bottom lip wobbled and she suddenly dragged Alastor into a tight embrace in the middle of the street.

Alastor's heart raced, his face draining of colour as he lost his breath, and he struck her hard across the cheek.

She stumbled and he scrambled away from her with a vicious snarl and dials flickering in his eyes as his antlers grew wide and tall.

She stared at him, a delicate hand placed against her bruising skin, and he panted and tried to wrangle his emotions under control lest his silhouette break free. His gaze cleared and he realised what he had done.

He opened his mouth to speak but found that no words would roll off his heavy tongue, so he swallowed and stared at her in horror as she slowly dropped her palm to reveal the handprint on her cheek.

Silence fell between them for a few moments.

"...What happened to you, Alastor?" Rosie asked softly. "What did she do?"

Alastor suppressed his trembling and his smile grew strained. “I’d rather not relive it, my dear.”

Her brows pinched together with sympathy but she nodded in understanding and Alastor relaxed his shoulders. He took a tentative step forwards and raised a hand carefully to her cheek, muttering old words beneath his breath and healing the damage he had caused. Rosie watched him patiently, unflinchingly as green sigils flashed in the air around them.

Once he was finished, Alastor stepped backwards and drew his cane in front of him, curling both hands tightly around it. “Allow me to treat you to lunch?” he asked quietly, apologetically, and Rosie tipped her head in agreement.

When she next met his gaze, she smiled brightly. “Tell me about this quaint little hotel of yours.”

The tension eased from Alastor’s frame.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: In the first section, there is some dubious consent between Vox and Valentino. Sort of. Their relationship is not healthy in any case.

We're officially in canon era! You know what that means for the next chapter ;)

Chapter 35: Nothing Changes (Everything Changes)

Chapter Notes

Warnings at the bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Every teasing wink at his CCTV, every cocky smirk, *every time that damn advert for the hotel came on* had Vox seething and stewing and digging his claws into the arm of his chair.

Alastor was parading around that hotel like it had been *his* idea.

Bastard.

And then the idiot decided to go and actually *fight* for the hotel and its residents. Fight against *Heaven*. Had he lost his mind?

And what had the residents done to deserve his love anyway? What had they done to deserve his protection? He would abandon them during the final battle, Vox was sure of it. Alastor *always* ran away. He was a coward. He always betrayed the people who cared about him.

...Except he hadn't run.

He had stayed.

He had fought for them.

He'd almost *died* for them.

And that hurt more than Vox had expected it to.

So, as he'd watched the showdown between Alastor and Adam from the safety of V-Tower, he'd laughed and jeered and tried to hide the wounded feeling in his chest.

Clearly, he'd never meant anything to Alastor. Alastor thought him worthless. Replaceable. Not worth fighting for.

Vox's hatred for him rocketed up a notch.

Then, something unexpected happened. And it *was* unexpected, despite everything Vox had tried to make himself - and everyone else - believe.

Alastor *lost*.

Vox's breath hitched, heart stopping for a moment as Alastor's cane broke and he was catapulted into the wall behind. He collapsed and struggled to recover and something was *wrong*. There was too much blood and the Radio Demon couldn't stand and-

And he was about to die by Adam's hand.

A thousand feelings passed through Vox, intertwined with memories of past and present, sweet and sour, and Vox felt nauseous, felt *ecstatic*, felt terrified and grief-stricken, felt *relieved*...

"Yes! Fuck you, Alastor!" he said with a cackle and he wrapped his arms around himself as he turned away from the screen because he didn't want to watch anymore, didn't want to see Alastor *die*-

No, he did! He wanted to watch the light fade from Alastor's eyes, wanted to hear him *beg* for mercy-

Valentino was grinning, pleased, gaze glued to the screen, and Vox wanted to hurt him suddenly, because Valentino wasn't allowed to take pleasure from Alastor's demise - not after everything he had done to *both* of them. Not after he'd had a hand in ruining everything good in Vox's afterlife.

Velvette stared at him worriedly and he ignored her.

"This is better than sex!" he crowed and Valentino's smile fell as he shot Vox a disdainful glance.

"Have to disagree with you there! Radio's not dead, but it is ending this broadcast..."

Alastor sounded strained and blood dripped from his lips as he gathered his broken staff and melted into the shadows.

Relief flooded Vox's chest, taking him off guard.

He bristled at his body's reaction and cursed Alastor out.

Beside him, Valentino grinned knowingly.

Vox couldn't keep going like this.

He couldn't keep being pulled between conflicting emotions. He couldn't stomach any more of Valentino's *smirks*. He couldn't keep losing his breath every time he heard Alastor speak. He couldn't keep struggling with the thought of how beautiful Alastor looked whenever he saw him. He couldn't keep reliving the softer memories of their earlier days. He couldn't keep *longing* for things to go back to how they had once been...

He needed to cut the rot out from the root.

He needed to dig Alastor out of his own heart.

If he wanted peace, he needed to strike whilst Alastor was *weak*.

Alastor slumped into the worn chair behind the mixing desk in his radio tower, grimacing as he did so.

He gingerly removed his hand from his chest, wincing at the blood stain growing over his shirt.

Every part of him hurt or ached or *burned*.

He glanced at his broken cane and his lips pulled into a snarl.

Bitch.

She had restricted his power at the last moment, greedy for his pain. Why she had done that when she wanted him to bring Charlie to her, he didn't understand.

He glanced at the blood coating his hand. His own blood. He clenched his fist and coughed a little, crimson droplets spraying over the floor.

If he didn't heal himself, he might *actually* die.

It was an effort to murmur the healing chant and he was shocked when the sigils floating around him suddenly flickered and faded away, his magic receding with them. Panic prickled at his chest. Why was she still restricting him? Did she want him to bleed out?

He groaned as he was yanked off his chair by his chain and dragged a few feet across the floor.

He collapsed, trembling as he did so, and he coughed harder, gasping for breath.

“I don’t understand,” Alastor growled weakly. “What do you want from me?”

Another tug on his chain, dragging him towards the door. He slumped over the floor with a pained groan.

Did she want him to return to the hotel? Was that it? He’d be damned if he let anyone see him this battered and bruised and *broken*.

There was another yank to his chain and he tumbled out of the door and threw his hands in front of him to stop himself from falling down the dozens of rusted metal steps that led out of the tower. He twisted his head to watch Lucifer pick Charlie up from the rubble.

“*Bleeding heart,*” whispered a breathy voice in the back of his mind and he startled, blood turning to ice as he cast his gaze around frantically, trying to find his torturer.

After a moment, he closed his eyes. She was still locked away. It made sense that if she could possess him through his chain, then she could also whisper things into his ear like a particularly heinous intrusive thought.

So, she did want him to crawl his way to Charlie like this. She knew Charlie would feel *sorry* for him. She knew Charlie would want to help him.

“*Favour,*” whispered The Root and Alastor scowled.

She wanted him to call his deal in.

This was it. Charlie was upset and vulnerable after Pentious’ death and now was the perfect time to lure her into The Root’s grasp by passing it off as a way to *save* Alastor.

He curled his fingers over the edge of the step.

He had grown... *fond* of the hotel residents in his time here. Charlie sometimes reminded him of softer, gentler days with Vox and he found himself distressed by the idea of betraying her - of doing to her what he had done to his old friend.

His hesitance was obvious and The Root pulled his chain again. He winced as he crashed down a couple of steps.

He crawled to his feet, doubling over at the pain spiking through his chest and stomach. His shirt was saturated with blood by now and he felt light-headed.

He steadied himself with the railing.

He had no choice in the matter. If he bled out, technically it would have been by angelic blade, so there would be no return for him. He’d simply *stay dead*.

He managed a shaky step before a hand clamped around his shoulder and he barely recognised the buzz of static before he was hurled inside his radio tower.

He collapsed onto his ass with a soft groan, spine propped awkwardly against his mixing desk, and he scowled up at his assaulter.

Vox's smile was wide and menacing.

Alastor's eyes widened for a brief moment and he lost his breath before he quickly recovered and masked his shock with a vicious smirk of his own.

"Long time no see, *old pal*," Vox said casually before his gaze dropped to the gash in Alastor's chest and stomach. Vox sucked air through his teeth. "Ooo, that looks nasty. You'd better see someone about that."

Alastor's smile widened. "I was about to, old chum! If you'd be so kind as to step aside and let me head on down to the princess, then I can get this little inconvenience patched up."

Vox pouted mockingly. "What? Too weak to fix it yourself? Pity." He revealed an angel blade that he'd likely plucked from the rubble and he twirled it around his fingers idly.

Alastor fell silent, a lump forming in his throat suddenly. When he managed to tear his gaze away from it to focus on Vox's face, the Television Demon was glaring coldly at him.

"A pity for *you* at least," Vox said quietly as he slowly advanced on Alastor. "Being so *vulnerable*."

Alastor shifted uncomfortably against the mixing desk. Fear filled his gut and he attempted to summon his shadows but to no avail. The effort had him feeling even more light headed.

"This isn't very sporting of you," Alastor said with a weak smile, gaze glued to the blood-covered blade. "Hiding up in that tower of yours for the main event then sneaking down here once the show's over. Taking the glory of someone else's kill. I thought you more honourable than that."

Charge crackled over Vox's frame as his face contorted in fury. "What the fuck do you know about *honour*?" he snarled before tightening his grip on the blade. "And I'm not doing this for glory. I warned you, Alastor, you should have *stayed gone*."

Panic gripped Alastor's chest and he glanced around for an escape. He tried to dissolve into the shadows but the attempt failed and he buckled with a hissed curse as he continued to bleed. The room spun at a strange angle and Alastor squeezed his eyes shut.

He didn't want to die.

Not like this.

Not after everything he'd suffered through to get to this point.

And definitely not by *Vox's* hand.

"Vox, please," he whispered, letting his ears fall for the first time in *months*.

"Too late for begging," Vox growled. "But feel free to keep going. I enjoy hearing the *fear* in your voice, Radio Demon."

A coughing fit caught Alastor by surprise and Vox stiffened in disgust as blood spattered across his trousers. "Great. Now I'll have to get these dry-cleaned."

Alastor felt very cold and very tired. "Vox," he murmured as he struggled to keep his eyes open.

He choked as a hand wrapped around his throat and his eyes flew open to see Vox kneeling in front of him, snarling, as he aimed the blade at Alastor's chest.

“I want to see the light fade from your eyes,” Vox hissed. “I want to see you struggle and choke on your own blood. I want to see your pain and suffering after all the times you attacked me and toyed with me and abandoned me to die at *her* hands!”

Alastor frowned and shook his head slowly. “I never abandoned you,” he managed, words slurring slightly.

Vox laughed hysterically. “You’re still trying to get me to believe that? I’m about to cut out your heart the same way you cut out mine, and that’s the hill you’re gonna die on?”

Alastor wondered when he’d shut his eyes as he forced them open again. “I was possessed,” he mumbled and electricity danced over Vox’s body again before he growled and slammed Alastor’s head against the mixing desk.

Pain blossomed in Alastor’s skull, jerking him awake, and suddenly, Vox was tearing him away from the mixing desk and forcing him onto the floor and straddling him, his thighs bracketing Alastor’s hips and a hand pinning his wrist far too tightly.

It was Purgatory all over again.

Alastor was wide awake as fear and humiliation and *adrenaline* surged through him and he barely registered the knife heading for his chest as his eyes went round and his free hand shot to Vox’s throat.

Vox gagged, dropping the knife instinctively to claw at Alastor’s hand and Alastor’s chest heaved with panic as his wrists were stretched high above his head, Vox snarling down at him, their faces inches apart.

Sometimes bargaining worked. Not always, but sometimes his attackers liked to hear him beg and plead for mercy and they would stop their attack.

...Vox had mentioned something about begging earlier, hadn't he? Perhaps if he was lucky, the Television Demon wouldn't escalate things if Alastor begged well enough. *If he was a good little fawn.*

He was going to bleed out, but he didn't want to die whilst being raped.

"Please don't," he whispered hurriedly. "Please, Vox. I'm not worth the effort. You deserve better than second-hand trash. I'm broken and- and not fit for purpose. You deserve something newer, something *tighter*, something that hasn't been worn out by *years* of use."

Think, think, think! What else would deter him?

"I'm not worthy of you," Alastor tried, lowering his gaze in an effort to look humble. "I'm not worthy of *perfection*. You shouldn't soil yourself with me. I would only taint your flawless image. I'm filthy. Rotten. I... I'm a whore. Used by too many men for me to count. You don't want me. You deserve something perfect. Something untouched."

He kept his gaze low, panting softly as every inch of his skin ran hot. He waited for Vox to laugh or ridicule him or continue anyway.

He waited.

And waited.

And finally lifted his gaze up to Vox's face in confusion.

Vox stared at him with wide eyes. "What the fuck?" he blurted.

Alastor blinked. This wasn't usually how things went.

He frowned as he picked out a few other details he had never noticed in Purgatory. Like the soft buzz of static in the air and the frequency that clashed against his. How had he forgotten those traits of Vox's? How had he forgotten about their absence when he was in Purgatory? He had noticed it at first, but as the months turned into years, he had grown accustomed to the silence and deemed it as the new normal, but now he realised how *abnormal* Purgatory Vox had been.

...And since when did Vox have a crimped antenna? That wasn't very *perfect* of him.

Vox raked his gaze over Alastor's body and Alastor's ears flattened against his skull. Vox noticed the gesture and he scrambled off Alastor, shuffling back against the far wall with eyes as round as dinner plates.

"What the *fuck*?" he hissed hysterically.

Alastor frowned and slowly levered himself up, wincing at the strain to his wound.

Vox's static grew erratic as he raised his hands to his head. "What the *fuck* did you think I was going to do just then?" he demanded and Alastor stared at him in silence, utterly lost.

Vox looked even more horrified by his silence and he pressed his head into his hands. "What the fuck is happening?" He glowered at Alastor and jabbed an accusing finger in his direction. "*Why* are you acting like I'm... like I'm about to-" He cut himself off and shook his head before bouncing to his feet. "Why does it even matter? I'm supposed to be killing you!"

He stormed towards Alastor, then stopped when Alastor flinched.

"Fuck," Vox said firmly before he raised a finger again. "Fuck you. I don't care. You ruined my life. You betrayed me. You abandoned me. You toyed with me for *decades*. I don't want to know where you've been for seven years. I don't want to know about any of the shit you just spewed. I don't want to know why you keep flinching. I don't care."

Alastor tilted his head curiously. This was... very different.

He *almost* recognised this Vox.

Vox narrowed his eyes and picked up the discarded blade by Alastor's side. Alastor watched silently as Vox scowled down at him, flexing his fingers around the weapon.

"I didn't abandon you," Alastor said slowly.

"Fuck you," Vox replied.

Alastor might not have been strong enough to use his magic, but he could certainly pull up an old audio file.

"What have you done with him?!" Alastor snarled, filters fritzing.

"I told you not to cross me," said The Root calmly.

"Where is he?" Alastor roared to the sound of banging in the background.

"Here, with me. He'll face the trials like everyone else who comes here."

"Bring him back!"

"No."

“Bring him back, you bitch!” Alastor hissed.

“No.”

More heavy thuds.

“Please,” Alastor said, softer this time.

“No.”

“I’ll do anything you ask of me,” Alastor whispered. “Please, bring him back. He doesn’t deserve to suffer for my mistakes.”

“You don’t need him. You have your kitten now,” mocked The Root. “Vox’s corpse will make a nice addition to my collection, wouldn’t you say?”

“Please bring him back,” he whimpered.

There was a long pause.

“You didn’t really think I’d let you have him, did you? After all of your disobedience? The foul attitude you have with me? Did you really think I’d let you keep him?”

“Bring him back.”

A sound of distaste. “Do change the record, little fawn. You can’t have him back. He’ll face these trials like everyone else.” Her voice sweetened. “Now, what have we learned?”

A pause.

“We’ve learned,” continued The Root patiently, “that punishment follows bad behaviour. I own you, Alastor. I own your soul and your body and your relationships. Never forget that.”

“Please,” Alastor begged, voice breaking. “Please. Take me instead. He doesn’t deserve this.”

“No.” She huffed in annoyance. “Now leave. Possession is rather exhausting. I’d like some time to recover and introduce myself to my new friend.”

There was a series of bangs and thuds before silence took over. Then, anguished sobs filled the recording.

Vox swallowed thickly then shook his head. “No,” he said with a wild grin. “No, you’ve played this trick before. I won’t fall for it again. Last time I believed you, my reward was three months in Purgatory and *this*.”

A black chain shimmered into view around Vox’s throat and Alastor stiffened as he swallowed down bile.

Vox grinned at him, but there was a haunted look in his eyes and his static pinged off Alastor’s skin as the chain disappeared. “You have no idea what I went through because of you.”

Alastor barked out a laugh that had him wincing.

“Fuck you, you bastard!” Vox snarled and he lunged at Alastor again, climbing on top of him and wrapping his hands around his throat.

Alastor froze once more at the feeling of Vox's body atop his and Vox's screen glitched before he released Alastor's throat in favour of digging his claws into his shoulders.

"Where did you go for seven years?" he hissed.

Alastor smiled darkly at him. "Get off me." The effect was ruined by another hacking cough and his eyes attempting to roll into the back of his skull as the adrenaline petered out.

Vox bristled and clamped a hand over Alastor's wound, making him cry out. He cried out again when Vox poured electricity through him.

"Where did you go?" Vox snarled.

Alastor writhed, muscles overstretching as Vox's charge continued to course through him. "You know *exactly* where I went," Alastor managed through gritted teeth.

Vox shook his head angrily. "You're lying. You traded me for your freedom. She couldn't have dragged you back."

Alastor managed to send him a withering glare through the onslaught. "You have no idea what I went through because of you," he echoed, still smiling, always smiling.

Vox finally eased up on his attack and Alastor wrinkled his nose at the stench of his own burned flesh. He glanced down at his wound and blinked to find it cauterised.

Actually, now that he thought about it, he felt a little better. Like a recharged battery.

He and Vox were more similar than he cared to admit.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Vox asked lowly and Alastor bared his teeth and attempted to shove Vox off him, but his rival fought back and Alastor found his wrists pinned beside his head once more.

“You failed her request so I was drafted in your place,” Alastor spat. “She hated how *weak* you were, so she decided to train me before my little mission.”

Vox fell silent, brows pinching together. He seemed to search Alastor’s face for something before he pursed his lips.

“...How far did you get?”

“Third trial,” Alastor growled before he smiled wickedly at Vox. “You?”

Vox shook his head. “Couldn’t even get past the first one.” Finally, he released Alastor and sat on the floor opposite him. He scowled and picked up the knife again as though it brought him comfort to merely hold it. “Guess you really are stronger than me.”

Alastor slowly sat upright, watching Vox warily. “I really didn’t abandon you to her.”

Vox curled his fingers tighter around the blade. “It would make things a lot easier if you did.”

Alastor frowned in confusion.

The corners of Vox’s mouth turned downwards. “Because if you’re telling the truth, then everything that happened to me, everything that happened to you... it’s all my fault. Because I wasn’t strong enough. Wasn’t good enough. Wasn’t clever enough to figure it out.”

Vox drew his knees to his chest and dropped the bottom of his screen onto them and Alastor raised his eyebrows at the defeat and misery in his tone.

“...I should have told you the truth sooner,” Alastor said quietly. “I shouldn’t have tried so hard to push you away. I thought I was protecting you.”

Vox snorted and averted his gaze and Alastor had never noticed how *exhausted* he looked.

“Doesn’t matter now,” Vox muttered and he sounded... hurt. He sighed and stood. “What’s done is done. No changing the past.” He turned to the door, leaving Alastor on the floor. “Don’t think this changes anything. You’re not top dog anymore, Alastor. The Vees run the show now and we won’t let you get in the way of that. Cross us and we’ll destroy you.”

Alastor watched Vox’s fingers close around the handle and his heart twisted painfully. They could have been something good but they had broken each other.

And they hadn’t meant to.

Now, they were different men on different paths and they were *worse* for it. They could have been happy. They could have had each other to trust and rely upon, but they had been doomed from the start. They had always been destined for misery and violence and humiliation, even in their human lives. They would always be *alone*.

Alastor startled at the wetness upon his cheek and he wiped away a stray tear before lifting his desperate gaze to Vox.

“I was raped.”

Vox hesitated then turned to face Alastor with a frown.

It was as though a dam inside Alastor had finally burst. “In my early twenties, I was raped by three men. They killed my mother and my father. My fiancée left me because she couldn’t stand the idea of me having engaged in intercourse with other men - regardless of the fact that

it had been against my will. My friends turned their backs on me because they were either disgusted or didn't know what to say. My life was *destroyed* in one night. I vowed to kill those men and I succeeded."

Alastor clenched his fists. "But Hell punishes its sinners and made me into *prey*. I was afraid of reliving that night and plenty of demons wanted a piece of me, so I made a deal for power with someone I shouldn't have and everything got *worse*. "

Alastor licked his lips and raised his gaze to meet Vox's frown. "And then I met you. And suddenly, Hell didn't seem so bad."

Vox's frown deepened.

Alastor looked down at his lap. "Except I ruined that by trying to protect you. I thought I could keep you out of her grasp but I was wrong."

His smile was strained. "So, yes. I know *exactly* what you went through, Vox. I've had seven years of it."

Vox was quiet for a long time. "Hard to trust a guy who never stops smiling."

Alastor glanced at him tiredly. "Well, I hardly have a choice in the matter." He managed to reveal the thick sutures holding his smile in place and Vox's frown faded into a look of concern.

They stared at each other for an entire minute.

"What am I supposed to do with all that, Alastor?" Vox asked finally, eyebrows pitching downwards.

Alastor matched his expression. "I thought you deserved to know the truth."

“Maybe you should have kept it to yourself,” Vox said viciously and Alastor scowled and looked away, ears flat. Vox had an uncanny ability to make him wear his emotions plainly for all to see.

Even after fifty years of rivalry.

Vox flexed his fingers around the blade. “It doesn’t change anything,” he said firmly before turning away and pressing on the handle.

He paused, scowling at the handle.

“It doesn’t change anything,” he announced again and Alastor ducked his head a little lower, smile bitter.

Suddenly, Vox whirled around, wiggling the blade in Alastor’s direction. “It doesn’t change anything that happened, you hear me? Because maybe you *did* let me dance with you and touch you and hold you when we were friends, despite the fact that you had every fucking right to hate men and people touching you, and you were struggling with that on your own and I thought you were just an eccentric germaphobe or something, but no, you were just *traumatised* and-” He cut himself off abruptly and pointed the blade tip at Alastor. “But it doesn’t change anything.”

He turned around and closed his fingers around the handle.

He hesitated and rounded on Alastor again, waving the knife around once more.

“And, okay, yeah, I get now why you roundhouse kicked me in the fucking face when I pinned you down in my office. That makes total fucking sense now,” he snapped. “But it still doesn’t change anything.”

Alastor blinked, ears slowly rising as Vox turned away and glowered at the handle.

“Actually,” Vox growled as he whipped around to glare at Alastor. “A lot of things make sense now. A lot of your stupid reactions that I didn’t understand at the time but now... Well, now they all make perfect fucking sense, don’t they?” He jabbed the knife in Alastor’s direction. “But it doesn’t change anything, got it?”

Alastor nodded slowly. “Got it,” he parroted.

Vox nodded once and opened the door.

Then closed it again and faced Alastor.

“And I don’t fucking care that you’ve been gone for seven years, by the way. I don’t care that she’s definitely used your past against you. I don’t care that you’ve had seven years of shitty trauma, that she probably made you relive that night over and over and over.” He threw his arms out dramatically. “And judging by your reaction to me just then, she probably made me star as one of your rapists too, right? Fan-fucking-tastic! But you know what? I don’t care. You know why?”

Alastor stared up at him. “...Because it doesn’t change anything?”

Vox grinned ferally. “Exactly! Because it doesn’t change any fucking thing!”

Alastor tilted his head slightly. He was beginning to think that his confession might have changed *something*.

Vox didn’t even bother turning back to the door this time. “You know what? I’m fucking happy. I’m *happy* with my afterlife right now. I’m a powerful Overlord. I practically run Pentagram City. I’ve got a great business. I get fucked in the ass by a pissbaby moth. You look up the definition of *happy* in the dictionary, and you’ll see my fucking smile right

below,” Vox seethed. “And you aren’t gonna waltz in here with your fucking sob story and your big expressive ears and change all that.”

Alastor felt a genuine smile trying to work its way across his face.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, old pal.”

Vox grinned sarcastically and waved the knife around a little more. “Good. Because it doesn’t change the fact that you still fucking *hurt* me, Alastor. It changes the context a little, sure, because you apparently did push me away to protect me, and you immediately came running after me when I returned from Purgatory, trying to comfort me, and I attacked you because I didn’t realise you were actually *possessed*, because who the *fuck* would believe that?” Vox’s mouth drew into a thin line. “You should have told me sooner. Now it’s too late and it doesn’t change anything.”

“Are you going to stab me with that or are you going to keep using it for emphasis?” Alastor drawled and Vox glanced at the blade in his hand before pointing it at Alastor.

“I’m going to use it to emphasise how little anything has changed,” he growled.

Alastor nodded and crossed his legs, giving Vox his full attention. “Continue.”

“I will,” Vox huffed. “Because it means that before you were apparently *possessed*, you actually fucking apologised for hurting me, you kissed me and told me you loved me and you held me and said I was yours and all these fucking years, I thought you were toying with me, trying to get me to trust you before you dumped me at that bookshop, but now I’m not sure if you actually fucking meant all that shit.”

Alastor’s eyes sparkled in amusement. “I did mean all that shit.”

Electricity raced over Vox’s frame and he rammed the blade into the wall and left it there. “Okay, well that’s fucking fantastic, but it doesn’t change a single thing.”

They stared at each other for another moment; Vox's chest heaving with rage and Alastor trying to fight back a smile of amusement.

"Fuck," Vox announced before he plopped onto the floor a few feet away from Alastor.

"Eloquently put."

Vox shot him a baleful glare. "Fifty years of resenting you, loathing you, plotting your demise... and it was all based on a fucking misunderstanding."

"To be fair, it was a rather complicated misunderstanding," Alastor said cheerily. "And most of that was my fault."

"You came to check on me and I drove a glass shard through your fucking eyeball," grumbled Vox.

"I broke your screen, which gave you the shard in the first place."

"Yeah, which was an understandable response to me *climbing on top of you* now that I know what you... What you went through." Vox frowned miserably at his knees. He pressed his palms against his screen. "Damn it, Alastor. Why didn't you tell me sooner? Maybe we could have avoided this shit show."

Alastor's ears fell and his smile faded a fraction. "I'm sorry, Vox. It's not something I particularly enjoy talking about."

Vox grimaced and he rubbed the back of his neck. "No, that's... that's fair. I just..." His shoulders slumped and he stared hard at the floor.

“I’ve missed you,” he sighed.

Alastor swallowed, caught off-guard by the sincerity in his tone. For a moment, he saw a piece of an old, familiar Vox shining through and his heart skipped a beat.

Suddenly, Vox huffed a laugh and shook his head at himself. “You’ve just been through seven years of hell with me as one of your main torturers. I’m probably the last person you want to talk to.” He stood and headed towards the door. “Go back to your friends, Al. They’re probably worried about you.”

Vox’s shoulders were hunched, expression forlorn as he pushed through the door, and Alastor clambered to his feet quickly, ignoring the pain at his chest and stomach. He steadied himself against the mixing desk.

“I’ve missed you too, Picturebox,” Alastor said quietly.

Vox stilled in the doorway but didn’t turn around.

“Doesn’t change anything,” he said softly before he let the door close behind him.

For some reason, Alastor had a feeling that Vox might be lying about that. He frowned at the door for a while then stared down at his cauterised wound and, for the first time in decades, Alastor thought that Vox might not hate him as much as he claimed to.

After a moment, Alastor straightened, holding his head high as he made his way downstairs to join the hotel residents.

And it didn’t cross his mind that Vox had inadvertently derailed The Root’s plans.

Warnings: brief mentions of rape/Alastor's past but nothing graphic

The bit you've all been patiently waiting for! So, you might notice a slight tone change in this chapter and that should give you a hint as to how the next part of this fic is going to go ;)

UPDATE: Art for this chapter - Go show the artist some love!

<https://www.tumblr.com/mxple-sxpghost-wxfile/764943449574227968/a-gentle-touch-chapter-35-dancingdog-hazbin?source=share>

Chapter 36: Caffeine-Flavoured Olive Branch

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Doesn’t change anything,” Vox growled the next morning as he poured himself a black coffee. He hated black coffee but he’d been drinking it the past years because anything with excessive amounts of cream and sugar reminded him of his early days with Valentino.

When his afterlife had started going downhill.

He sipped his coffee and pulled a face at it but forced himself to drink it anyway.

“Doesn’t change anything,” he muttered as he removed the knife from the torn photo of Alastor as he tidied up the rec room. He glowered at Alastor’s soft smile and stormed over to the trash bin, fully intending on disposing of the ripped picture.

At the last moment, he folded it up and placed it in his inside pocket.

He ignored Velvette’s raised eyebrow.

“Doesn’t change anything,” he mumbled as he dusted off the old radio Alastor had bought him as a joke once. There was an engraving in the polished oak that read ‘*Vox’s upgraded head*’.

He put it on his desk, plugged it in, tuned into some rock music, and glared at it for a moment before starting on his paperwork.

“Doesn’t change anything,” he murmured into the darkness as he tried not to move lest he wake Valentino.

His new bruises ached and he was pretty sure there was blood trickling down his back where Valentino had dug his claws in. His thighs hurt and his ass throbbed and his throat felt as though it had been put through a meat grinder from where Valentino had strangled him.

He was pretty sure that one of his ribs was broken. It hurt to breathe so he switched to his mechanical ventilation system so he wouldn’t have to expand his chest.

He glanced down at the possessive arm Valentino had curled around him before staring up into the darkness once more.

“You’re going to the meeting?” Valentino asked incredulously as Vox shuffled his papers about, carefully keeping his back to the moth demon.

“Yes.”

“You haven’t gone to an Overlord meeting in nearly twenty years,” Valentino pointed out. “You always send me or Vel or skip them completely. Why are you going now?”

“I’m the face of VoxTek. I should be going,” Vox said with a frown, shoulders tense.

“You realise Alastor will be there, don’t you? And that freaky cannibal *puta*. ”

Vox scowled. “Alastor’s presence doesn’t change anything. I should still go.” He rolled his shoulders. “And don’t call Rosie that.”

Because it had occurred to Vox that Rosie hadn’t been on Alastor’s side all those years ago, because there weren’t any *sides* in the first place. Rosie had merely been trying to help resolve the misunderstanding between him and Alastor.

He was such a dumbass.

Valentino suddenly smirked. “Wait... Are you going to kill Alastor at the meeting? Is that why you’re suddenly so keen to attend? You’re going to make sure the Radio Demon doesn’t escape this time?”

Vox’s frown deepened. He might have told the other Vees a *small* lie about his last confrontation with Alastor.

From the corner of his gaze, he caught Velvette rolling her eyes before she continued reading her magazine.

“Yeah, sure,” he grumbled. “That sounds like a perfect fucking idea. Let’s decapitate Alastor in a room full of Overlords. That won’t start an all-out war.” He shot Valentino a withering glare. “Use those two marbles rolling around your skull, Valentino. Don’t be stupid.”

Valentino straightened, baring his teeth at Vox. “Then maybe I should come with you and kill him myself.”

Vox’s screen glitched and he was surprised by the anger rising within him. He kept his voice neutral. “Only one of us needs to go. Stay here and play with one of your *whores*.”

Valentino clicked his tongue before crossing his arms. After a moment, he smirked. “You know... maybe instead of killing Alastor, you should hypnotise him into working for us. We

could dress him up and put him on camera. Make him take a couple of dicks. Say what you want about him, but he's a pretty little thing. He's got the hips for porn."

Charge raced over Vox's frame as his fury unexpectedly spiked. "The fuck did you just say?" he snarled as he grabbed Valentino by the coat and jerked him forwards.

Valentino shoved at Vox's chest and dusted himself off with a disdainful expression. "Calm down, Voxy. I was joking." He trailed a finger down the side of Vox's screen and Vox caught his wrist with a growl and stalked away from him.

"I'll see you both later," Vox muttered.

It started with a coffee.

A takeaway cup was placed in front of him before the Overlord meeting began.

Vox sat on the other side of the conference table with a similar cup, scowling and very pointedly avoiding eye contact with Alastor.

There was writing on the cup. In black sharpie were the words *'This doesn't change anything'*.

Alastor blinked at the cup and when he raised his gaze, he found every other Overlord - except Vox - staring at him with wide eyes, as though they were waiting for his reaction.

The *suspense*.

Alastor blinked placidly and sipped at the cup then placed it in front of him and clasped his hands together with a smile.

Black with a drop of honey; the way he had it before he began all of his radio shows. He found that honey soothed the throat and allowed him to talk for longer.

He was pleasantly surprised that Vox had remembered.

Everyone continued to watch him for a moment longer and when he didn't turn purple and begin hacking up blood, they figured out that the coffee was, indeed, poison-free.

They shifted their gazes to Vox, whose scowl deepened.

“What?” he challenged and the other Overlords averted their gazes.

Carmilla raised an eyebrow. “I haven't seen you at one of these meetings for nearly two decades, Vox. To what do we owe this monumental honour?”

“Thought I'd give you something to gossip about,” Vox said sarcastically.

Carmilla glanced pointedly at the cup in front of Alastor. “Well, you've certainly achieved that.”

Vox's screen tinged pink and Carmilla started the meeting.

Alastor studied Vox throughout the meeting, noting how he refused to look in his direction. He curled his fingers around his coffee cup and wasn't sure if he should feel amused or melancholic.

He noted the crimped antennae and the tension in Vox's shoulders and the permanent scowl that seemed to be etched onto his screen these days.

Alastor's gaze dropped to the writing on his cup.

Something had changed.

Vox had extended a caffeine-flavoured olive branch. Perhaps Alastor should do the same?

He turned his attention back to Carmilla and sent a little burst of static racing beneath the table, straight into Vox's leg.

Vox straightened.

"Everything alright, Vox?" Carmilla asked, deadpan, and Vox sent her a tight smile.

"Peachy."

She continued and Vox cut Alastor a narrow-eyed glare.

Alastor smiled lazily at him.

Vox crossed his arms and turned to face Carmilla again, sending Alastor a very subtle middle finger.

Alastor sipped at his coffee with a smirk.

His wound was healing. Slowly.

Alastor's magic was still restricted and his cane remained broken in his room - a physical reminder of his current weakness.

The Root Of All Evil had been suspiciously quiet these past few days considering that Alastor - or more accurately, *Vox* - had derailed her plans. Perhaps she thought that if she restricted Alastor's magic and prevented him from healing himself, he could still lure Charlie to her by revealing the wound.

The thing was, now that Alastor wasn't actively *dying*, he was in two minds about the whole affair.

It wasn't as though she would release him from his contract if he delivered the princess to her - that was *Vox's* deal regarding Lucifer. The only thing she had promised Alastor was that if he *didn't* bring Charlie to her, he would be locked in the trials for all eternity until the day he completed them or *forfeited*. She wouldn't rescue him this time.

So in summary, he was damned if he did and damned if he didn't.

Which, in all honesty, wasn't much of an incentive to betray someone he was genuinely starting to care about. He'd made that mistake before and he didn't fancy making it again.

Another thought had occurred to him recently. If The Root was so desperate to take Charlie, why not possess him and convince her to follow him in the same way she had with Vox?

So many unanswered questions.

He leaned back against the park bench, watching two drunk sinners stumble along the path whilst another played with a five-eyed dog with far too many teeth and legs.

A nearby CCTV camera swivelled slowly towards him as though trying to evade his notice.

Alastor smirked up at it and allowed his image to be captured by it, undistorted. He gave it a cheeky wink.

There was a buzz of static and a frequency clashed with his own and Alastor turned to find Vox perched on the edge of the opposite side of the bench, frowning deeply with his arms crossed.

“It pisses me off when you do that,” Vox grumbled.

“When I do what?”

“When you let my cameras capture you then fucking wink at me.”

Alastor studied him for a moment. “Do you make a habit of saying the opposite of what you actually mean?”

Vox’s scowl deepened and he hunched his shoulders. “Do you make a habit of being an asshole?”

Alastor shifted his gaze to the strange dog creature.

“Sometimes. What happened to your antenna?” he asked idly.

Vox was quiet for a moment and Alastor glanced over at him to find him glaring at the grass, arms wrapped tightly around himself. Alastor noted that he did that a lot - wrapped his arms around himself or crossed them over his chest. As though he were holding himself. Protecting himself.

“Val broke it.”

Alastor was surprised by his own rage, but he managed to keep his smile light even as his ear flicked.

Despite his efforts to remain neutral, Vox caught his ear twitch and sighed quietly. It occurred to Alastor that they could still read one another surprisingly well after all these years apart.

Perhaps Vox hadn't changed as much as Alastor had assumed.

“Modern televisions don't have them anyway,” Vox muttered as he reached for his hat. “So I removed them.”

Alastor wasn't ready for the sight of Vox's antennae *attached to his hat*.

Vox fingered the brim of his top hat. “It isn't like they served a purpose. I don't *need* them.” He pressed his lips together and Alastor stared at his antenna-less screen.

“Then why keep them?” Alastor asked.

Vox pursed his lips, toying with the tip of the damaged antenna. “It's part of the brand, isn't it? Everyone recognises them.”

Alastor observed Vox's frown for a moment. “Is that the only reason?”

Vox was quiet for a long time as he ran his finger over the damaged antenna. “I like them,” he admitted softly.

Alastor's chest ached as he watched Vox touch the antennae. He looked weary, defeated.

Miserable.

Vox scowled at the hat. "But they're just another fucking spare part for Valentino to break." He smiled sharply at Alastor and wiggled the hat. "So I made them into a costume and everyone can buy a copy for the low, low price of twenty dollars!"

He tossed the hat carelessly onto the ground and stared at it for a few seconds before grimacing and picking it back up again, dusting it off, and setting it in his lap. He brushed his fingertips over the damaged antenna once more.

Alastor watched him for a little while and wasn't sure what to do with the growing ache in his chest.

"I like them too," he said finally before turning his attention back to the dog creature.

He could feel Vox staring at him.

"The suit's a nice touch," he added, without looking at Vox.

His breath hitched when Vox's frequency settled into a harmony with his and he turned to the Television Demon to find him observing him with an exhausted expression.

They watched each other for a little while, trying to figure out the right frequencies for a long-forgotten harmony. It took a few tries for them to not slide out of tune but they eventually found a familiar frequency and both of them sank a little further into the bench.

"This doesn't change anything," Vox said quietly.

Alastor simply nodded and enjoyed the peace of the afternoon.

Alastor woke with a start, sweat slicking his neck and chest heaving with lingering fear.

After a moment, he growled to himself and slumped back against the pillows. He stared into the darkness for a while and when the anxiety began to rise, he flipped on the lamp to chase the shadows away.

The darkness reminded him far too much of Purgatory.

He rolled onto his side and into the dim orange glow of the lamp and he stared at the small radio on the bedside table.

He wondered...

He flipped the radio on and touched its casing affectionately and his eyes flickered briefly to dials.

“Vox?” he whispered.

There was a long stretch of silence and Alastor’s shoulders slumped a fraction. He supposed it made sense that Vox had discarded the old gift. He reached over to turn the radio off.

The ancient television at the end of the room flicked on with a quiet hiss of static, its screen depicting a snowy signal.

“...Al?” asked a distorted voice, but a familiar one nonetheless.

Alastor smiled at Vox's sleepy tone. "Sorry, old pal. I didn't mean to wake you."

He had kept the radio. After all these years, Vox had kept the radio. Warmth blossomed in Alastor's chest without warning and he raised his eyebrows at himself.

"You didn't," Vox murmured and the interference eased a little, his voice becoming clearer. "I'm in my office finishing some paperwork."

Alastor glanced at the clock. *Two a.m.* He frowned. "Do you always work this late?"

"I've been up for forty-eight hours straight," Vox scoffed. "I do it all the time. I'm fine."

Alastor's frown deepened. "That's hardly something to be proud of."

"I'm not proud of it," grumbled Vox. "But since I'm mostly made of wires and chips, I might as well take advantage of being able to pull all-nighters. Besides, this paperwork isn't gonna do itself."

"You should rest," Alastor chided and he wondered about the 'wires and chips' comment. Hadn't he also recently made a comment about being made of 'spare parts'?

"*You* called *me*," Vox pointed out. "Why are you up? What's wrong?"

Alastor stared at the snowy scene on the old television and rubbed at his arm, wondering what sort of white lie he should scrape up.

"...Nightmare?" Vox asked gently.

Alastor blinked in surprise and he found the tension easing from his shoulders. “Yes,” he admitted.

“I get them too,” Vox murmured. “Want to talk about it?”

Alastor remained silent, a frown pinching his brows.

“I talk to Val about them sometimes. Doesn’t always help but occasionally it does,” Vox said and his voice was gentle and soothing without him realising it, and Alastor pulled the covers a little tighter around him, ears swivelling towards the television. “So... want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” Alastor said. He’d much rather listen to Vox’s voice - to this softer version of the Television Demon that Alastor hadn’t heard in *decades*.

Vox fell quiet and Alastor pursed his lips.

“Tell me about your day, Vox,” he whispered.

“...You want to hear about my day?” Vox asked in obvious shock and his voice was hushed and tentative.

“I want to hear you talk,” Alastor admitted quietly.

Vox hesitated for so long that Alastor wondered if he had asked for too much. Then Vox cleared his throat lightly. “So, today I had a meeting with an imp from Envy...”

Alastor closed his eyes and let Vox’s rich voice wash over him.

Chapter End Notes

A chapter of gentleness because you guys deserve it after the last... 35 chapters XD

Anyway, doesn't change anything.

Chapter 37: Baby Steps

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Valentino is going to throw a tantrum when he finds out about the coffee.”

Vox froze then plastered on a charming grin as he turned to a scowling Velvette.

“Excuse me? What coffee?”

Velvette crossed her arms and jutted a hip out. “Don’t play dumb. Did you really think the gossip wouldn’t spread? It’s the third most trending hashtag on Sinsta.”

Shit.

Vox’s smile widened. “Don’t believe everything you read on the internet, Vel!” He turned back to his monitors and Velvette stalked over to him and pointedly put a hand on the old radio he turned on every time he was filling in paperwork.

He told himself it was because he hated the silence, that it reminded him of Purgatory, so he put music on to fill the quiet. But the truth was he could just as easily have played music from a more modern piece of technology - he could have even played music from his own *head* if he wanted to. He had certainly done it before - many times, in fact, when he and Alastor used to dance together.

His heart ached a little at the thought and he slid his gaze to the old radio. He knew exactly why he’d had the radio on all week. Last week, Alastor had started speaking to him through it

and every night since then, they'd been having small, meaningless conversations about their days before they drifted off to sleep.

"You've been... calmer these past couple of weeks," Velvette said quietly. "Ever since the coffee."

Vox snapped his gaze to her and she shrugged. "It's true. I've noticed a difference, which is weird considering he's supposed to be your enemy."

Vox pressed his mouth into a thin line. "He's still my enemy. The coffee doesn't change anything."

"Then why give it to him?" Velvette challenged before she patted the radio. "Why get this out of storage? Why keep his picture? Why did you get so *upset* when Valentino suggested putting him on camera?"

Sparks danced over Vox's frame at the reminder of Valentino's *joke*. Velvette raised an eyebrow at him.

"Nostalgia," grumbled Vox. "And because Val has a shitty sense of humour."

"You never properly explained how you two fell out," Velvette prodded. "I know you used to work together, but was that it? What did you two mean to each other?"

Vox tensed. "Nothing," he replied automatically, as he did whenever anyone asked him that question. "I meant nothing to him and he meant nothing to me. We used each other to get to where we wanted to be."

She cocked an eyebrow.

Vox frowned and slid his gaze to the radio.

“I hear you two talking at night,” Velvette said and Vox stiffened and glanced at her sharply.

She shrugged. “I work late too, sometimes. I’ve heard you a couple of times now. Your office isn’t as soundproof as you think it is.”

Vox frowned and Velvette waved a hand dismissively. “I couldn’t give less of a shit if you’re talking to Alastor or not. I barely know the guy.” She scowled at him. “But it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that you two meant *something* to one another. Valentino despises him, but you... I always got the vibe that things were a little more complicated for you.”

She stared at him expectantly and he glanced at his office door before sighing. “We used to be... friends,” Vox allowed.

“Just friends?”

Vox smiled bitterly. “It’s complicated.” His heart twisted painfully and he stared at the console for a long moment, collecting his thoughts.

“We both wanted more,” Vox said softly, deciding to take a chance on his youngest business partner, and Velvette blinked in surprise.

“It didn’t work out?”

Vox grimaced. “We never got to try.” He tapped his throat and Velvette frowned. She knew of his chain - Valentino had revealed it in one of his infamous temper tantrums whilst she had been scrolling through her phone in the corner of the room. He had forgotten she was there.

It had been one of his and Valentino’s bigger fights.

“Three weeks ago - just before the coffee - Alastor revealed the final pieces of the puzzle that I’d been missing,” Vox said as he slumped into his chair.

“When you went to kill him,” Velvette guessed and Vox nodded as he scrubbed a hand down his screen.

“It was all a big, messy misunderstanding,” Vox muttered. “One that wasn’t really our fault. We were pitted against each other from the start and now...” He trailed off with a thoughtful frown.

“And now you’re wondering if you could try again?”

Vox startled and shook his head quickly. “Fuck no. Things are way too broken. We’ve spent more time hating each other than we ever have being *friends*. There’s too much history between us, too much hurt. Things can never go back to the way they were.”

Velvette put on a false smile. “And of course let’s not forget that you’re in such a *happy* relationship with Valentino!”

Vox winced and averted his gaze. He had obviously bitched to her about Valentino a little more than he had intended.

She pulled a face. “Look, I don’t care where you stick your dick, but if Alastor makes you happy, then you’ve got all of *eternity* to fix whatever broke between you both.” She flicked her hair behind her shoulder. “I love Val, but you two have the most fucked-up, toxic relationship I’ve ever seen.”

Vox grimaced and she patted his shoulder and pushed away from his console. “Go hunt some deer ass and give me some fucking peace,” she said as she slipped her phone out of her pocket and left his office.

Vox stared after her in shock.

Honestly, he hadn't expected support from *Velvette*.

Maybe he really did bitch about Valentino more than he realised.

He turned his attention back to the radio. She was quite correct - he would be stuck in Hell with Alastor for the rest of eternity, and eternity was a very long time.

He brushed his fingers over the radio's polished wood and a small smile pulled at his lips.

Perhaps *something* had changed.

"Coffee?" Valentino snarled. "You got him a fucking coffee?"

He snatched Vox's phone from his hands and threw it at the wall, destroying it. *And another one bites the dust.* Vox stared at him boredly.

"It was just a coffee. Calm down, Val."

"What happened to killing him?" Valentino hissed.

"I've grown as a person," Vox drawled sarcastically before he stood up from the couch only to be shoved back down by Valentino. Vox pulled a face and frowned up at him.

"Have you forgotten what he did to you?" Valentino growled.

“Have I forgotten that he beat me half to death on multiple occasions? No. Of course not.” He frowned at his lap. “But it’s recently come to light that things are a bit more... complicated than that.”

“Complicated?” Valentino echoed incredulously. “You ended up in Purgatory because of him! You’re *chained* because of him!”

“Except it wasn’t his fault,” said Vox quickly. “He was possessed.”

Valentino scoffed in disgust. “Listen to yourself.”

Vox crossed his arms defensively. “You know as well as I do how powerful Roo is.”

“He’s getting inside your head again. Manipulating you. This is exactly what he did last time and you keep falling for the same trick!”

“Except I’m not,” snapped Vox. “Because we talked and I learned a lot of shit about him and everything makes so much more sense now and-”

“He’s lying to you!” Valentino snarled and Vox stiffened when Valentino suddenly dropped into his lap and pinned him against the couch. “You’re *mine*,” he whispered as he caught the bottom of Vox’s screen between his finger and thumb.

Vox’s expression hardened and he smacked Valentino’s hand away. “Oh, so it’s fine for you to fuck other people behind my back but the second I even *talk* to Alastor, you get all jealous? Grow up, Val.”

“He is never going to want you the way you want him,” Valentino hissed and Vox snorted and sent a short burst of electricity through Valentino that had him wincing.

“I don’t *want* him in any way,” Vox said. “I just don’t see the point in holding a grudge over a misunderstanding. The coffee was an offer of truce, nothing more. An offer he accepted.”

Valentino smiled viciously. “Oh? Then I’m sure you won’t mind me slitting that pretty little throat of his with one of Carmine’s new angelic weapons...?”

Vox’s screen glitched and he bared his teeth at Valentino, matching his feral smile. Alastor was *wounded*. He wasn’t prepared for another fight right now.

“You and I both know how badly that would end for you,” Vox lied. “You’re no match for him.”

Valentino scowled and deflated a little. “Where did he go for seven years, anyway? Did he tell you?”

Vox relaxed a fraction. “Purgatory,” he said bluntly.

Valentino grimaced and eased his grip on Vox’s wrists before sliding next to him on the couch. Vox straightened his suit.

“I thought you said he traded you for his own freedom?” Valentino said with a perplexed frown. “How did she drag him back there?”

“I was wrong,” Vox said quietly. “He was never free. He never meant to trade me. Like I said, he was possessed.”

Valentino’s frown deepened and he drew his wings tighter to himself. “...And all that sweet crap he said right before to lure you in? To trick you? Was he possessed then?”

Vox shook his head silently and Valentino hunched in on himself with gritted teeth.

“Great,” seethed Valentino. “And once again I fall second to the great Radio Demon. Resigned to a fucking consolation prize.” He wrapped his arms around himself and averted his gaze and Vox felt a sliver of pity for him.

He placed a tentative hand on Valentino’s knee. “That... isn’t true. Things between Al and me... they’ll never go back to what they were. There’s too much damage. Too much betrayal.” Vox shook his head slowly. “I don’t think we can ever be *friends* again, but I think I could learn to hate him a little less.”

He squeezed Valentino’s knee. “It’s *exhausting* being so afraid of him all the time, keeping tabs on him, fighting him, despising him...” His voice grew a fraction softer. “I just want some closure, Val. Is that too much to ask for?”

Valentino glanced at him miserably before sighing and shaking his head. “I suppose not.” He slotted his fingers between Vox’s over his knee.

Vox smiled. Sometimes their relationship was gentle and understanding and Vox supposed that was why neither of them could stay away from each other for too long. No matter how much they hurt each other, there would always be a deep understanding of each other - shared trauma that bonded them.

“Just... be careful,” Valentino murmured. “Don’t let him break you like he did last time. Don’t trust him too easily.”

“I won’t,” Vox promised and he raised Valentino’s knuckles to his lips and kissed them sweetly.

Alastor was... concerned.

The Root had been silent for three weeks now.

What was she waiting for? Was she biding her time? Waiting to see how things played out? Crafting new plans? New punishments?

It was unnerving to say the least.

“Perhaps she’s given up?” Vox suggested weakly, his voice filled with staticky crackles from the old television.

Alastor stared up at his ceiling, tapping his fingers against the duvet as he settled against the pillow.

“I know you’re not that naive.”

“No,” admitted Vox. “But if I keep telling myself that, I won’t live in constant fear of her dragging me back there.”

Alastor pressed his lips together, sliding a little more into the dim glow of the orange lamp. He could feel his shadow gnawing at the bars of its prison, desperate to escape like it had during the fight with Adam. Tonight there was nothing to fight, however, and Alastor didn’t want to find out where it would direct its attention.

“Vox?”

“...Yeah?”

“Can I ask what you saw? What you went through? Up there.”

Vox was silent for a long time. “No,” he said finally. “No, I don’t trust you enough for that.”

Alastor’s ears flattened. He should have expected that response, but for some reason his chest still tightened.

“I doubt you’d want to discuss what happened to you,” Vox said defensively when the silence stretched between them. “That place plays on your deepest secrets, your emotions, your vulnerabilities. Don’t be sour with me because I don’t want to reveal all that. You refused to reveal those things even when we were *friends*.”

Alastor frowned at the ceiling and clasped his hands over his stomach, guilt tugging at his heart.

“What?” growled Vox when Alastor didn’t respond. “Surprised I’m not desperately crawling back to you? That I’m not begging for your attention like I used to? That I’m not welcoming you back into my life with open arms and a heartfelt ‘*we can do anything together*’?”

Alastor blinked at the anger in Vox’s tone and he sat upright and frowned at the snowy interference on the television screen.

“I’m not your loyal little lapdog anymore,” Vox snapped, frustration and hurt becoming clearer in his voice. “I’m not going to keep chasing you, begging for you to talk to me, for us to work things out. You made it quite clear that you’d rather push me away than trust me to help. You made it clear how easy it is for you to *break* me and then pass it off as you *protecting* me.”

Alastor’s shoulders sagged and he curled his fingers into the sheets.

“You know what?” Vox hissed. “Fuck you. Fuck you for being able to do that to me after I told you I loved you. Fuck you for not trusting me. Fuck you for making me feel like a worthless piece of shit. Fuck you for *abandoning* me!”

A sharp pain lanced Alastor's chest and he sucked in a deep breath as he fisted the sheets.

"I'm sorry," Alastor said softly and Vox scoffed.

"Not good enough," he snarled but there was a crack in his voice and Alastor had a feeling that he was crying. "You were my best friend! You made me feel safe! You made me feel loved! I trusted you more than I trusted anyone else in my miserable life and afterlife. You made me feel like... like I *meant* something. Like I was *worthy* of love, and then you... you just..."

There was a flare of static and a suspicious clicking sound with a strange sort of echo and Alastor realised that Vox was sobbing.

His heart broke all over again. "I'm sorry, Vox," he whispered. "I'm so very sorry. I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted to leave you. I was so afraid of what she'd do to you. She kept threatening you and then Valentino threatened to reveal to all of Hell that I'd been raped and I felt trapped. I confronted her, asked her why she had revealed my past to Valentino and she... That was the first time she gave me a taste of purgatory, of my *punishment* should I stay with you. Of *your* punishment if I continued to defy her."

He closed his eyes, recalling the spiralling series of events as though they had happened yesterday rather than fifty years ago.

"You showed up at my house and I was terrified. *Broken*. I couldn't control my silhouette, couldn't keep you safe if I stayed... So, I moved. And I knew it would break you. I knew you wouldn't understand."

He shook his head with a bitter smile. "But you couldn't stay away. You wouldn't lie down so easily. You followed me to the bookshop and I *panicked*. I realised the only way to keep you away was to... to *hurt you*. Or at least my silhouette realised that." The memory of Vox's shattered, bleeding body still haunted his dreams sometimes. "And you know the rest of the story." The story of Vox eventually returning to him, of Alastor becoming possessed, of Vox disappearing for three months...

The television was silent for a long time.

“Valentino what?”

Alastor blinked and tipped his head to one side in confusion.

“Valentino threatened to do what?” Vox asked again, louder this time, *angrier*.

Alastor opened his mouth then closed it again. *Oops*.

“So let me get this straight,” Vox growled lowly. *“When I found Val at your house, when you blinded me and ran away and I was upset because I thought you’d abandoned me to him... He had just threatened to tell all of Hell that you’d been raped?”*

Alastor nodded, then realised Vox couldn’t see him. *“Indeed.”*

A long pause.

“I’m going to ram a fucking screwdriver through his skull.”

Alastor barked out a startled laugh before shaking his head. *“Now I’d pay good money to see that,”* he teased.

“I’m not joking, Alastor. I’m going to fucking kill him.”

Alastor’s gaze softened. *“He’s your business partner, amongst... other things. I doubt you actually want to kill him over a man you’ve hated for fifty years.”*

There was a loud burst of static and a *pop* and the television turned itself off as Vox suddenly appeared in front of it looking flustered and furious and clutching a screwdriver. Charge flew over his frame as he rubbed at the bridge of a nose he didn't have.

Alastor felt slightly underdressed in his nightwear.

Perhaps even a little vulnerable.

Still, he smiled curiously at Vox.

Finally, Vox seemed to notice Alastor's attire and his screen tinged pink. "Oh, I didn't realise you were actually *in bed*. I thought you were just... lying on it. Fully dressed."

He stared at the red tuft of fluff protruding from between the lapels of Alastor's pyjamas and his digital eyes went wide and round, mouth falling slack for a moment.

Alastor slowly, pointedly, pulled the duvet up to his neck.

Vox's screen *burned* a cherry red.

He rubbed the back of his neck and dropped his gaze to the screwdriver in his hand as his fans whirred faster - enough for Alastor to pick up on a definite pitch change.

"Okay, so I came here because I really was about to go drive this through Val's skull, but you're right that it would be stupid of me to go kill him over my enemy of fifty years, but at the same time, you were never supposed to be my enemy because I loved you so damn much and things might not have turned out quite so shitty if Val hadn't made you feel trapped that night, and I'm really only in a relationship with Val because I couldn't have you and I felt so fucking worthless and he was there to pick up the pieces that you broke, except I don't know if he's fixing them or breaking them more and-"

He clamped his mouth shut, as though he realised that he was rambling. He stared helplessly at Alastor, who blinked back at him in surprised silence.

“I don’t know what to do,” Vox confessed quietly. “I want to hate you. I want to hate him. But honestly, I’m just so exhausted.”

Alastor stared at him for a long moment, at the weariness in his face and the tension that seemed to be a permanent part of his shoulders these days, at the sparks chipping haphazardly off his frame and the misery in his gaze...

Alastor swallowed and patted the bed twice.

Vox flinched and shook his head. “Alastor, no-”

“Lie down, Vox,” Alastor commanded gently. “Rest for one night, away from your monitors and modern technology and your tower.”

Vox pouted. “Leave my modern technology out of this.”

Alastor’s smile widened into something more genuine. “We all know that modern technology is the root of life’s problems. It’s what’s wrong with today’s generation!”

Vox relaxed a fraction and placed the screwdriver on top of the television. “Damn. When did you start sounding like an old fart?”

“Wisdom comes with age, old pal,” drawled Alastor before he smirked. “For most of us, at least.”

“Fuck you,” Vox scoffed before he rounded the bed and hesitated beside it, looking uncertain.

Alastor tapped the free side of the bed again in invitation.

“Don’t overthink it,” he said softly.

Vox swallowed and toed off his shoes, shed his coat and loosened his tie and top button before gingerly lying in the empty space.

They stared up at the ceiling, an awkward silence settling between them.

“The third trial - the one I failed - it wasn’t Fear or Lust,” said Alastor quietly. “It was *Pain*.”

Vox frowned and tilted his head towards Alastor. “She tortured you?”

Alastor swallowed, staring up at the ceiling as his ears lowered and his eyes grew wide and haunted at the memory. He shook his head. “She tortured *you*.”

Vox watched him for a long moment. “What happened?”

Alastor toyed with his own hands, refusing to look at Vox. “She made me watch every fight we’ve ever had. She made me watch myself break you, over and over, with words and fists. Then she made me watch *potential* fights. Future fights. Fights that could *never* happen. I kept killing you, over and over and over again, and the scenes would loop and each time, you grew more desperate, more exhausted, and I noticed the cracks in your screen wouldn’t disappear between fights. The bruises began to stick, the blood wouldn’t wipe away, and the scenery would change but you wouldn’t heal. You started begging for me to stop, you got on your knees and cried for mercy and still, I watched a copy of myself lay into you over and over.”

Alastor licked his lips, digging his own nails into his hands to ground himself. “And then suddenly, it wasn’t just a copy. *I* was the one hurting you. And no matter how much you begged, no matter how much I tried to resist, I kept *breaking* you. *Killing* you. You tried to

run. You tried to hide but I kept finding you. And there was nothing I could do to stop myself.”

Bile crawled up his throat. “There was one scene... We were in the street outside the bookshop... You were propped against the wall and you were... you were ripped in half, barely conscious but somehow still alive. You were coated in blood. I could see all of your organs spilling out onto the street. Your screen was smashed in but you could still see me. You... you were crying. Begging me to leave you alone. You couldn’t *move*. Couldn’t escape, and I... I...”

Alastor’s stomach rolled and he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and dry heaved.

Vox was behind him instantly, laying a comforting hand on his back, but the touch startled Alastor and he whipped around and punched Vox hard in the face, sending a spider web of cracks radiating from the centre of his screen.

Vox grabbed Alastor’s wrists instinctively and pinned him to the bed, pouring a burst of high voltage electricity through his body until Alastor arched and cried out in pain, and suddenly, the fear of being pinned beneath a man’s body combined with the agony of being electrocuted had Alastor’s silhouette breaking free.

Vox gasped as the silhouette pounced upon him, clawing at his back with a vicious grin before it grabbed his leg and hurled him across the room and into a wall. Vox scrambled upright but the silhouette was quicker and it bit into his shoulder before raking its claws down his sides and Vox screamed.

Alastor’s heart raced, fear gripping his stomach as he watched the trial from Purgatory play out in real time, and he scrambled off the bed and threw himself over Vox, hissing as the silhouette tore its claws through his flesh instead.

“Stop!” he commanded, making a pained noise as the silhouette clawed at him again, this time ripping straight into the wound at his chest. It tried to reach around him, gripping the edge of Vox’s cracked screen, and Alastor instinctively placed a hand over the back of Vox’s head and buried his face against his bloodied chest.

“Enough!” Alastor snarled as he mantled his body around Vox, hiding him from view of the deranged silhouette.

The silhouette scowled at him, mouth gaping angrily.

“He was defending himself!” Alastor hissed at it. “I attacked him!”

“Shouldn’t have touched you,” Vox mumbled into his chest and it didn’t slip Alastor’s notice that the Television Demon’s hands were clamped around his own knees, knuckles pale from the tight grip.

Alastor glanced down at him and for a moment, he worried that he’d see great holes in Vox’s frame, his organs sliding out of his body and blood pooling around him. He was relieved to find Vox in one piece.

“You were trying to comfort me,” Alastor murmured bitterly before glaring at his silhouette. “He isn’t our enemy.”

The silhouette snarled at him before backing off and lurking in the far corner of the room.

Alastor found himself brushing his fingers across the back of Vox’s casing before releasing him with a grimace. He frowned at the new web of cracks on his screen.

Vox frowned back at him and they observed each other for a long moment. Finally, Vox dropped his gaze to the wound that had reopened on Alastor’s chest.

“It’s started attacking you again,” he said quietly.

Alastor nodded slowly. “It didn’t exist for seven years. It’s restless.”

Vox's gaze darted to the snarling silhouette. "It's made of your emotions."

"It couldn't exist up there. Very little magic can," Alastor murmured and he glanced over his shoulder. "Since returning, it has become... unpredictable."

Vox stared at him for a long while. "Because you're traumatised."

Alastor's ears flattened. "Yes." He met Vox's gaze. "I'm not the man you remember. I can't... I can't do the things I once did." He dropped his gaze to Vox's hands where they were still clasped around his knees. "There are things I'm no longer capable of."

After a moment, Vox's gaze softened. "You protected me."

"It would have killed you had I not stepped in."

"You could have let it. I would have regenerated eventually."

Alastor scowled and a small, sad smile pulled at Vox's lips. "I'd like to put my hand on your chest to cauterise that wound. Is that okay?"

Alastor blinked and looked up at Vox and Vox smiled patiently at him. "It'll be a low current. Ten seconds tops. Do I have your consent?"

Alastor straightened and he searched Vox's face for any hints of malicious intent before he slowly nodded and braced himself.

"Need you to say the words, Al," Vox said gently. "Yes or no?"

Alastor's eyes widened. "Yes," he whispered.

Vox raised his hand slowly and laid it upon Alastor's chest and Alastor immediately tensed before a gentle burning sensation lapped at his skin. He watched the wound dry up and Vox immediately removed his hand and clamped it over his knee again.

Alastor was suddenly uncertain how to feel and he frowned at his chest for a long moment.

Vox stood and Alastor's gaze snapped to him.

"I'd... uh... I'd better go back to V-Tower and repair this," Vox said as he gestured to his screen.

"Let me help you," Alastor said before he could stop himself.

Vox blinked at him before licking his distorted lips. "...Really?"

Alastor nodded and stood, a small spark of *something* in his chest. Excitement? Anxiety? Guilt? "Bring the replacement here and I'll fit it for you."

Like old times.

Vox stared at him and Alastor saw that same spark of *something* reflected in his cracked gaze.

"It's easier to replace than the other ones," Vox whispered and Alastor watched Vox's hand twitch towards him before he curled his fingers into his palm and forced it by his side again.

Alastor's chest ached.

“I’d figure it out even if it wasn’t,” he murmured.

Vox swallowed and shuffled towards the antique television. “I’ll uh... I’ll be back in a sec.” He disappeared into it and Alastor’s chest tightened before he flicked his gaze to his silhouette, only to find it had already melted into him.

He perched on the edge of the bed and waited, ears pricked towards the television.

Vox returned a moment later, clutching the replacement screen a little too tightly. He joined Alastor on the edge of the bed and under his direction, Alastor quickly replaced the damaged screen.

They caught each other’s gazes again.

“...Can I stay?” Vox whispered and his tone was cautious, nervous even. “I won’t... I won’t touch you. I just... I don’t want to stay at the tower. I’m tired of being alone.”

“Won’t Valentino miss you?” Alastor asked even as his hand slid a little closer to Vox across the sheets.

“He has other bed warmers,” Vox murmured and Alastor was caught off-guard by his own anger at the comment, at the *implications*. How could Valentino treat Vox as a mere bed warmer?

“Then stay,” Alastor said and his little finger brushed against Vox’s, startling the Television Demon.

Vox glanced down at where Alastor’s finger grazed his and a small smile tugged at Vox’s lips. Alastor finally figured out what that strange *something* was.

Hope.

They settled beside each other on the bed, faces illuminated by the dim orange glow of the lamp and after a few minutes, Alastor flexed his fingers over the duvet either side of him.

“That screen is far easier to replace. You could have done it yourself,” Alastor whispered up at the ceiling.

He felt Vox’s hand slide a couple of inches towards his. “I wanted you to do it.”

Alastor’s chest tightened and he hooked his pinkie around Vox’s.

Vox exhaled and squeezed his finger tightly.

With a small smile, Alastor fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Brief gore in last section

So, if you haven't figured it out, the fluffy part of the fic has begun ;) Also, we're officially past the word count of *Addicted*... which irks me to no end. 'This is going to be a shorter fic', she said... '60k words', she said...

Chapter 38: Into The Serpent's Den

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“This is your official reminder to put that overpriced paperweight down and head to bed.”

Vox looked up from his tablet and grinned. It was exactly midnight, just like it had been every night for the past seven nights when Alastor's voice had filtered through the radio.

He flipped a monitor on, focusing his energy through it and following the cables that led to the archaic television that Alastor refused to upgrade.

“I have a company to run, Alastor,” he said even as he switched the tablet off. “We can't all get our bills paid for by the Princess of Hell. Some of us have to work for a living.”

“And I'm sure that work will be waiting for you in the morning,” came the staticky reply. “Rest, Vox. You're no use to anyone when you're running on fumes.”

“It's hardly late,” Vox said. “I think I can do another three hours of paperwork without needing a coffee.”

“Do I need to come over there and wrestle that silly contraption off you?”

Vox snorted and placed the tablet on his desk. “Don't make promises you can't keep.” He stretched the kinks out of his back and stood, then shifted to unplug the radio. He picked it up and turned towards the door and almost dropped it when he came face to face with Alastor.

Alastor smirked slyly at him, gaze dropping to the radio in Vox's grip. "Are you taking me to bed with you?"

Vox's screen flushed crimson as his fans worked on double speed to cool him down. He returned the radio to his desk and grinned sheepishly. "Velvette keeps scolding me for falling asleep at my desk."

"You work too hard," Alastor chided and Vox flushed a deeper shade of red.

"Actually... I fall asleep listening to you."

Alastor blinked and Vox instinctively crossed his arms over his chest. "You talk to me in bed all the time! You can hardly pass judgement."

Alastor's gaze softened a fraction and Vox was caught off-guard by the expression.

"I'm not passing judgement, Vox. I quite enjoy the idea of you moving that radio to whichever room you're occupying. Perhaps I should get you something a little more portable?" he said, eying the wooden radio.

Vox placed a hand on it fondly. "I like this one. A lot of memories, y'know?"

Alastor stared at him for a long moment, smile small and... *familiar*. There was a strange feeling in Vox's chest - contentment and melancholy and heartbreak all at once.

"You kept it," Alastor finally murmured.

Vox traced two fingers over the engraved message on top of the radio. "I did." He flicked his gaze to Alastor. "Always had a soft spot for it."

Alastor held his gaze. “Even though it’s old and outdated and perhaps a little bit broken?”

Vox swallowed and splayed his fingers atop the radio. “Even though it frustrates me and I tossed it into storage for *years*... I couldn’t quite bring myself to let it go.”

Alastor’s smile didn’t waver but for the first time in a long while, Vox noticed the pain behind his eyes, and Vox flexed his fingers and dropped his gaze to the radio, letting himself grieve for what could have been.

His breath hitched as he was suddenly overwhelmed by agony, and he slowly brought his free hand to his chest, rubbing his thumb over his heart to ease the physical ache just behind his ribs. Had he ever let himself grieve before? He had been angry and spiteful and full of despair, but had he ever let himself grieve over Alastor before? Over what they had lost?

“Fuck,” Vox choked out as a wave of tears caught him by surprise. He wiped them away with his arm and suddenly felt hot and nauseous. The room swayed and he found himself gripping the radio to steady himself.

Alastor reached for him then quickly recoiled, looking pained, and Vox pressed a palm to his screen as it glitched.

Alastor didn’t want to touch him because he was filthy, vile, worthless, garbage, disgusting-

“Damn it! I can’t even-” Alastor cut himself off with a snarl and averted his gaze with a sharp, angry grin.

Vox looked at him curiously, his own self-deprecating thoughts fading into background noise.

Alastor caught his gaze and his ears fell comically. “I... I can’t,” he said quietly before he scowled and grit his teeth. “I threw myself over you not too long ago. I don’t understand why I can’t simply-” He growled and shook his head and wouldn’t meet Vox’s gaze.

Vox stared at him for a little while, watched him struggle with his own fears and insecurities in the way Vox himself often did, and his shoulders sagged.

“You’re not him,” Alastor muttered to himself. “I know you aren’t. I can see the differences and yet... and yet I can’t...” His fingers flexed again before he clenched them into fists. “I thought you would be easier.”

Vox frowned. “Al?” he asked tentatively.

Alastor scowled at him. “I hit Rosie.”

His ears were pinned to his skull and Vox watched them for a moment longer, entranced by their expressiveness. It had been years since Alastor had allowed them to move so freely - he usually held them upright, hiding his emotions.

“Why?”

“She hugged me.”

Vox fell quiet as the puzzle pieces clicked together. It wasn’t just Vox that Alastor couldn’t touch.

“It took months for me to allow her to touch me,” Alastor said quietly. “And even now it makes my skin crawl.” He dropped his gaze. “The same with Mimzy. That was worse. I thought I could force myself to embrace her - it had been so long since I last saw her - but afterwards I...” His nails bit into his palms. “I wanted to boil my own skin off.”

Vox blinked and his heart sank.

Alastor had opened up to him twice now. *Trusted* him with his vulnerabilities. Perhaps Vox could offer a little something in return? Show Alastor that he wasn't the only one struggling after Purgatory?

"You carved things into my skin," Vox said quietly. "You and Valentino and my parents."

Alastor startled and looked at Vox with wide eyes.

"Insults, slurs, sometimes meaningless patterns. You were meticulous. Sometimes you tore into muscle, sometimes you didn't. You knew how to make it hurt. When you weren't doing that, you were whispering degrading thoughts while you pulled organs and components and cables out of my body. Valentino directed you sometimes - he made it clear how he didn't like touching me." Vox smiled weakly but couldn't hold the expression for long and he wrapped his arms around himself again, frowning against the onslaught of vivid memories.

Alastor reached for him again then aborted with a frustrated growl. He met Vox's gaze.

"It wasn't real. I wouldn't do that to you. I... I could never *torture* you."

Vox's gaze hardened. "The last fifty years says otherwise."

Alastor stiffened and scowled. "We fought but I never once tortured you, Vox. I never dragged our fights out longer than necessary."

"None of them were fucking necessary!" Vox snarled, throwing his hands up angrily. "If you had just told me the truth, if you hadn't kept secrets in the name of protecting me, we might not have ended up in this fucking mess!"

Alastor grinned sharply. "If you hadn't shut me out for fifty years, if you hadn't gone out of your way to fight me, if you had *believed* me about being possessed, we definitely wouldn't be in this mess!"

“I was afraid of you!” Vox snapped and Alastor straightened, looking stunned. “You kept attacking me, kept pushing me away, and then you led me to that bookshop and how was I supposed to know that it wasn’t you?”

Vox began to tremble. “You finally opened up, you finally let me in and told me the truth and promised me that we could figure it out together, and then you lured me into that bookshop and for the next three months, I had to suffer through you calling me a *worthless whore*, and a *filthy machine*, and a *perverted freak*, and all sorts of other humiliating slurs while you found new ways to rip me apart and degrade me and put me through *agony* to the point I turned my entire nervous system off until I was *numb to it*.”

They stared at one another for a long time and Vox realised that he was shaking.

“Excuse me if I didn’t greet you with open fucking arms after all that,” he hissed but his voice cracked and his fans kicked on at high speed as his knees threatened to buckle.

Alastor caught his hand and Vox stilled.

A thumb brushed across his knuckles slowly.

“You’re safe,” Alastor whispered gently and a sob tore from Vox’s throat, his body lighting up with electricity as his knees finally gave in. He lowered himself onto them and hid his glassy gaze behind his free hand.

Alastor sank to the floor with him, still holding his hand, still rubbing his knuckles.

“You’re safe, I promise,” Alastor whispered and Vox suddenly wanted to be held. He reached quickly for Alastor’s coat, but the Radio Demon jerked backwards with dials flickering in his wide eyes.

“Don’t!” Alastor snapped viciously before he winced and looked at Vox with a pleading gaze.

Vox recoiled. “In Purgatory, were you...?”

“Yes,” Alastor muttered, closing his eyes. He took Vox’s hand once more and resumed rubbing his knuckles. “Repeatedly.”

Vox dropped his gaze to their joined hands and he squeezed Alastor’s gently. “But you passed that trial?” he asked, confused.

“It stopped being plausible when it starred you.”

Vox sucked in a sharp breath, bile crawling up his throat. “I *raped* you?”

Alastor grimaced, eyes still closed. “Like I said, I beat the trial because I managed to reason with myself that it wasn’t something you were capable of. I beat my fear... temporarily. The technicality was enough for the trial to end.”

“But in the tower, when I was holding you down, you clearly thought I was going to...” Vox trailed off, nauseous.

Finally, Alastor opened his eyes and fixed Vox with a pained gaze. “It took me some time to convince myself that you would never do that - enough time for you, for the image of you, to... indulge in a few rounds.”

Vox couldn’t hold Alastor’s gaze and he squeezed his hand tightly. “Fuck,” he breathed. “Al, I would *never*-”

“I know,” Alastor said softly, squeezing Vox’s hand just as tightly. “The memories are still vivid, however. He looked like you, even if he wasn’t.”

Vox stared at Alastor's hand and manipulated his fingers one by one, massaging his palm, bending every joint, relearning each crease until Alastor threaded their fingers together.

"How do we fix this?" Vox whispered after a few minutes of silence, both of them lost in their respective nightmares. He raised his gaze to meet Alastor's. "I want to try."

Alastor seemed surprised. "I'm not certain it can be."

"I want to try," Vox said again, firmly. "I miss you."

Alastor's ears swung upright, focused on Vox. He raised his eyebrows. "Vox... I don't think things can ever go back to how they were."

"I'm not asking them to," Vox said as he turned his free palm up in a subtle invitation. Alastor's gaze darted to the offer before returning to Vox's screen. "But I'm tired of fighting. I'm tired of hating you. I *miss* you, Alastor. I miss talking to you. I miss having lunch with you. I miss your laugh - the soft one - and I miss your static, your calming frequency. I miss my *friend*."

Alastor swallowed and Vox smiled affectionately when a tear escaped down Alastor's cheek. He resisted the urge to dry it, knowing Alastor would jump away.

"I miss you too, Vox," he managed and he gingerly slid his other hand into Vox's upturned palm. Vox traced his palm with a finger and Alastor's shoulders relaxed.

"She could drag us back at any moment," Alastor whispered, gaze haunted.

"Then let's enjoy the time we have left," Vox said sadly, massaging both of Alastor's hands. "I'm tired of letting her control my afterlife. If I'm going to suffer Purgatory for the rest of eternity, then I'm going to make the most of Hell."

Alastor huffed a laugh and Vox found himself grinning at the absurdity of his own comment.

“Alright, Picturebox,” Alastor said fondly and Vox’s smile widened at the old pet name.
“How do we fix this?”

“The fuck is he doing here?”

Alastor blinked slowly and turned to Angel Dust with a lazy smile. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“One of my bosses,” Angel growled. “The guy with a TV for a head.” He pointed at Vox and a frown marred the Television Demon’s expression. “Today’s my day off. So, you can tell Val to piss off because I’m-”

Vox rolled his eyes. “I’m not here on behalf of Valentino. Alastor’s showing me around the hotel. Enjoy your day off.”

Angel scowled and dropped his arm. “Thought you two had beef?”

“For lunch today, yes,” chirped Alastor with an impish smirk. “My first time having a Philadelphia cheesesteak and I must say that I rather enjoyed it!”

“Told you you’d like it,” muttered Vox and Alastor grinned wider at Angel.

“Don’t you two want each other dead?” Husk grumbled from the bar as he polished a glass.

“Heavens no!” Alastor said, waving a hand dismissively. “Now where would you get a silly idea like that from?”

“I don’t get paid enough to care about whatever you two are plotting,” Husk huffed as he picked up the next glass.

“Well, if you must know, Vox here has kindly offered to advertise the hotel on his many channels and I thought our dear Charlie would be thrilled to hear the offer from the source material!”

“Why are you offering to advertise the hotel?” Angel asked suspiciously.

“Out of the kindness of my cold, dead heart,” Vox deadpanned.

“Well, we mustn’t stand here tongue-wagging all day!” Alastor said brightly. “Come now, Picturebox, we have a princess to find.”

“The fuck is he doing here?”

Alastor restrained a sigh and turned to a rather spiteful-looking Lucifer lingering on the stairs. “We’ve just explained all that-”

“Oh shit,” Vox squeaked.

Alastor glanced at him in confusion, surprised to find genuine fear on his face.

Lucifer’s wings sprouted from his back and his horns rose from his skull, fire lighting his palms as he took to the air and aimed a finger at Vox. “I warned you what would happen if you approached me again, sinner.”

Alastor raised his eyebrows and carefully stepped in front of Vox, keeping his smile wide and disarming. He clasped his hands behind his back.

“May I ask what has brought on such a... *fiery* mood, Your Majesty?”

“Step aside, bellhop.”

Alastor’s smile sharpened. “No, I don’t think I will.”

Lucifer narrowed his eyes. “That sinner has committed treason and has violated his restraining order. He must suffer the consequences.”

Alastor blinked placidly, keeping himself firmly planted between Lucifer and Vox. “I suspect you are mistaken. I doubt that Vox has knowingly committed treason and it’s highly unlikely that Vox has any sort of restraining order against his name-”

“Alastor,” Vox interrupted quietly, *sheepishly*, and Alastor glanced over his shoulder with a raised eyebrow. “I... uh... I am in violation of a restraining order...”

Alastor’s other eyebrow joined the first.

“I didn’t know the king would be here,” Vox whispered.

Alastor stared at him. “Colour me intrigued. What could you have possibly done for the King of Hell to set a restraining order against you?”

Vox licked his lips. “Ah... treason.”

“I see. That’s probably something you ought to have mentioned a little earlier.”

“As I said... didn’t know he would be here.”

“We can talk about it more when your life isn’t at stake.”

Vox clamped his mouth shut and Alastor directed a cordial smile at Lucifer. “I’m certain he’s very sorry for whatever he did.”

Lucifer’s fire burned hotter. “I knew there was something *off* about you, bellhop. Charlie might trust you, but I knew you’d turn out to be another traitorous, selfish Overlord.” He gestured between Vox and Alastor. “You’re working in cahoots.”

“If by ‘cahoots’ you mean *trying to get this hotel brimming with sinners to fulfil Charlie’s dream*, then yes. We’re in ‘cahoots’,” Alastor drawled in amusement.

Lucifer made a low noise of irritation before his feet touched the stairs and he glanced over at a bored-looking Husk and a suspicious Angel. Lucifer scowled and crooked his finger at Vox and Alastor, beckoning them to follow him upstairs.

Alastor rolled his eyes and started after him but stiffened and whirled on Vox with a snarl when fingers gently closed around his arm. Vox recoiled quickly, holding his hands up in obvious apology, then his gaze darted to Lucifer’s retreating figure and he shot Alastor a desperate look and shook his head.

“We should go,” Vox urged quietly, gesturing towards the door.

Alastor raised an eyebrow. “I assure you that nothing is going to come of this,” he said with an eyeroll. “Lucifer enjoys his theatrics. That’s all this is. He’ll throw a temper tantrum like a spoiled child and we’ll get slapped on the wrists, then he’ll retreat to a room full of rubber ducks and complain to them like they’re his personal therapists.”

Vox's eyes were round, his gaze nervous. "Alastor, I don't think-"

"Come, my dear. I assure you no blood will be spilled today," Alastor said with a chuckle, hoping that Vox hadn't noticed his little slip.

Vox's startled blink proved that he had noticed the slip. Still, he was gracious enough to not mention it and he shuffled after Alastor with his head lowered anxiously.

They trotted up to the first floor and turned the corner into an empty corridor, only to be immediately slammed into the wall and held there by their throats as an enraged Lucifer, in all of his angelic glory, smiled viciously at them.

Vox side-eyed Alastor and Alastor resolutely ignored him.

"Same trick, different asshole," Lucifer snarled at them before he cast his gaze to Alastor. "Big mistake targeting my daughter."

Alastor's smile faltered and Lucifer's widened.

"You think I wouldn't work it out? I didn't trust you from the start, Radio Demon, but to brazenly walk in here beside the last shitstain that tried to trick me into getting trapped with that *bitch*..." Lucifer shook his head. "You're dumber than you look."

Alastor's eyes widened and he threw Vox a wild look. Vox grimaced and fell limp in Lucifer's surprisingly strong grasp.

"Nothing to say?" Lucifer growled.

Alastor forced a smile and tapped Lucifer's arm. "I would if I could breathe," he choked out.

Lucifer squeezed their throats a little tighter before releasing them and Alastor gasped as Vox rubbed at his neck, fans at high speed.

Alastor dusted himself off and straightened his shirt. "I assure you, Your Majesty, Vox and I aren't here with ulterior motives. Like I said earlier, Vox has kindly offered to air an advertisement for-"

"Cut the crap, Alastor," Lucifer snapped, folding his arms. "Charlie told me about your deal. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that you're plotting something. And the fact that you're suddenly teaming up with the guy that tried to trap me in Purgatory... Let me guess, you failed with me and Lilith's gone, so now you're targeting my naive, trusting daughter?"

Alastor clamped his mouth shut and Lucifer scoffed.

"With all due respect, Your Majesty... we haven't got much of a choice," Vox said quietly as he revealed the inky black chain around his throat and glanced pointedly at Alastor as a cue for him to follow suit. He did so, reluctantly.

Lucifer fell silent, staring between them with a thick scowl.

"You have five minutes to explain why I shouldn't kill you both where you stand." He summoned a flaming angel blade and Vox reared backwards in surprise as Alastor bared his teeth. Instinct had him shoving Vox behind him as his shadows slithered over the walls and floor, reaching for Lucifer, before they abruptly flickered and faded out of existence.

"Shit," Alastor muttered beneath his breath and he backed Vox against the wall as he looked around desperately for an escape route.

"Because we've suffered enough!" Vox snapped as he side-stepped Alastor and, for a moment, Alastor's heart jumped into his throat and his skin burned with fear at the thought of Lucifer losing the last dregs of his patience and smiting Vox.

“Because we’ve been through a fate worse than Hell and we’ve had to scramble through so much shit and blood and *agony* just to keep *existing*,” Vox hissed, sparks bouncing off his frame as his screen glitched. “Because we’ve been tortured and manipulated and *punished* for something we had no part in - for a fight that wasn’t ours to begin with!”

Vox gestured to Alastor. “Because she chained him when he was scared and vulnerable and because he was in the wrong fucking place at the wrong fucking time!” He gestured to himself. “And she chained me by manipulating the man I loved and making me think he’d turned against me! And that wasn’t enough for her, no, she had to trap me in that void and force me to face her trials and she wouldn’t even let me *die*! She kept rebuilding me, kept torturing me, and she told me the only way to make it stop was to bring you to her.”

Vox trembled, gaze going glassy and Alastor’s heart ached at the strain in his voice. His fingers flexed towards Vox and he withdrew them when Lucifer’s sharp gaze flicked to him briefly.

“And I only suffered for three months,” Vox said. “But Alastor? Alastor went through all that misery and torture for *seven fucking years*! All because I failed with you. I failed and he got punished for it.” Vox clenched his fists. “So there’s your damn reason!”

Lucifer was quiet for a little while before he pursed his lips. “You’ve both been to Purgatory?”

Vox nodded defiantly and Alastor found that he couldn’t tear his gaze away from his brave Picturebox.

He frowned at himself. *His?*

Vox wasn’t his.

After a moment, Lucifer sighed. “No mortal should ever step foot in Purgatory. It wasn’t meant for human souls.”

“No shit,” Vox snarled. “You have no idea what we’ve had to face. How that place plays on your deepest fears and pain and grief.”

“Actually I do,” Lucifer muttered. “Since I helped to create it. But you already knew that, didn’t you? She asked you to deliver me to her so I could free her.”

Vox’s mouth drew into a thin line but he refused to apologise and Alastor’s heart did something strange - something he hadn’t felt in over fifty years. Something that made him swallow and want to *touch* Vox.

“And let me guess,” Lucifer said as he flicked his gaze to Alastor. “That didn’t work, so she asked you to go after Charlie instead?”

Alastor’s smile was strained as he nodded slowly. “Unfortunately, your daughter has managed to carve her way into my blackened heart and I’ve been avoiding the task. However, I doubt I’ll be able to keep that up for too long when The Root keeps dragging me around by this damn chain. Or perhaps she’ll simply possess me like she did last time.” He cast an apologetic glance at Vox and Vox’s gaze softened.

“Possess you?” Lucifer asked sharply. “She shouldn’t be that powerful. She’s *imprisoned* and I’ve filled in all the cracks in Hell where her influence could leak through. She might have you on chains but she shouldn’t be able to override your *free will* -” He cut himself off suddenly and scowled at them both. “Have you been giving her *sacrifices*?”

Vox and Alastor glanced at each other and Lucifer gritted his teeth. “You’ve been *feeding* her? Delivering souls to her?”

“We had no choice,” Alastor pointed out and Lucifer shook his head angrily.

“Of course you did! You could have refused! Her power was strongest in the bookshop but once I destroyed it, it weakened her reach! Her only link to Hell was *through your chains*!”

Alastor shook his head quickly. “She has other links. Other souls in chains - in Heaven and Earth and Hell. She had strength long before the bookshop was destroyed.”

Lucifer chuckled darkly. “Is that what she told you? She’s been *starving* for centuries, sucking the odd soul through any cracks that appear before I or Heaven fills them or they close up naturally. She’s never had a permanent link between worlds... until you two.”

Vox and Alastor glanced at each other and Lucifer glared at their chains in distaste. “Now she’s found a way to stop the cracks from being filled. You two are like pipelines directly to Purgatory - no matter how much I fill the wall, the water will still flow through the pipe. And frustratingly, I can’t break the pipe.”

He jabbed a finger in Alastor’s direction. “You were afraid and stupid and you *fed her*. The pipe got wider and the water flowed faster and suddenly, she could give a little tug on your chain *outside* the bookshop as well as inside. You got even more scared and you kept feeding her, not realising you were giving her more control over you.”

He jabbed a finger in Vox’s direction. “And then you went to Purgatory for three months and you let her rebuild you, you let her weave threads of Purgatory into you, and she fed off you like a parasite. She latched onto you instead because the connection was stronger, and she sent you back to Hell.”

“She still had control over Alastor,” Vox protested and Alastor shook his head slowly.

“...She stopped talking to me,” he said quietly. “For *decades*.”

Vox whipped around to him with wide eyes. “What? No, when she asked me for fresh souls, she said you were still delivering to her. She said you were still *collecting*.”

Alastor licked his lips, heart sinking. “...She lied. I... I didn’t know she was making you bring souls to her. I haven’t brought her anything in decades.”

“I destroyed the bookshop and filled in the cracks,” Lucifer continued as though neither of them had spoken, “but I didn’t know there were two pipes preventing me from filling them completely. I weakened her influence, but somehow she still managed to grab Alastor.”

“...There was a tug on my chain. I returned to the ruins of the bookshop to see what she wanted.”

Lucifer laughed in disbelief. “You went *back*? Moron!”

Alastor scowled, ears lowering a fraction.

“Hey! You can shut the fuck up,” snarled Vox viciously, stabbing a claw in Lucifer’s direction. “She did everything within her power to fucking break him, physically and mentally, yet after *a hundred years* he’s still standing here with his head held high, defying her orders to lure *your daughter* back to the ruins of that damn bookshop!”

Lucifer straightened and Alastor stared at Vox, an old, familiar thrill in his chest. He licked his lips and swallowed and itched to reach for Vox’s hand.

“So don’t you *dare* mock him when you don’t know how fucking strong he is,” Vox spat and Alastor couldn’t take his eyes off Vox - off the Vox he *remembered*. The loyal, protective picturebox he used to know.

The Vox he had loved.

His chest tightened. He thought this Vox had long since died...

His static tickled Vox’s skin, frequency finding a familiar harmony, and Vox caught his gaze, fierce and determined.

“Mind your tone when addressing your king,” Lucifer grumbled but he wouldn’t quite look at Vox, seeming suitably cowed.

“Are we dismissed?” Vox growled, static thick and angry in the air. “Your Majesty?”

“For now,” Lucifer said quietly. “But I’m keeping an eye on you. If you dare try to tempt Charlie into helping that evil *thing* escape-”

“Then maybe you should help us find a way to fight her instead of condemning us for being her victims,” Alastor drawled.

Lucifer’s mouth drew into a thin line and Vox whirled on his heel. “Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to offer my services to help your daughter with her dream.” Vox cast a cool gaze over his shoulder. “Since I have some experience in the hotel business.”

He stalked away. “Come on, Alastor.”

Alastor smiled lazily at the seething Lucifer, offering him a little wave before trotting after Vox, unable to prevent his tail from wiggling beneath his clothes.

As they climbed the stairs, Alastor slipped his hand into Vox’s and squeezed affectionately.

A smile tugged at Vox’s lips and he slotted their fingers together, thumb sweeping over Alastor’s knuckles.

“Ignore him. How were you supposed to know she was lying?” Vox muttered. “You had every right to be afraid of her. She’s fucking evil.”

Alastor sidled a fraction closer to Vox, static bouncing off his skin playfully, and Vox matched his teasing static before gazing fondly at Alastor.

“Thank you, Vox,” Alastor said softly as he met the Television Demon’s warm gaze.

Vox blinked and opened his mouth before clamping it shut again as his screen tinged a cherry red. He quickly averted his eyes.

“You’re... uh... welcome.”

Alastor’s smile widened, chest light for the first time in decades.

“You pushed me behind you,” Vox noted after a minute or so and it was Alastor’s turn to look away.

“I suppose I did.”

“You didn’t hesitate,” Vox commented and Alastor could hear the grin in his voice. “You protected me. *Twice.*”

“If that’s how you want to look at it.”

“Thank you, Alastor,” Vox parroted and Alastor side-eyed him, rolling his eyes at his shit-eating grin.

Still, he held Vox’s hand a little tighter.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Brief mentions of rape.

A touch of Lucifer added into the mix ;) Don't we love these two being protective over one another?

Chapter 39: Smoke And Traffic Lights

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Charlie Morningstar squealed as she shook Vox’s hand with a surprisingly firm grip.

“You’re... ah... welcome,” Vox said, fascinated by her enthusiasm. Her smile was rather infectious and he found himself grinning along with her. Beside him, Alastor blinked slowly, like a particularly contented cat.

“You won’t regret this, Mr. Vox! We’ll keep it tasteful and short and-”

“Why are you helping us?” asked the suspicious angel - Viggie, Varry, Veggie... What had Alastor said her name was again?

“Vox has prior experience in the hotel industry,” Alastor said coyly, hands clasped behind his back.

“Since when?” Vuggie demanded.

“Since he built a hotel to help redeem sinners,” drawled Alastor.

“Bullshit,” Vanny scoffed.

An amused noise escaped Alastor and he shrugged as Vox tapped his fingers against his thigh.

“He isn’t lying. Sometime around the Eighties, I drew up plans for this place. Built it, recruited sinners, filmed it...” Vox frowned as he glanced around Charlie’s office and an ache started in his chest - something that felt a lot like guilt tugging at his heart. “It was successful, for a little while at least...”

When he next returned his attention to the princess, she was staring at him in awe. “The plans I found... they were yours?”

Vox nodded slowly.

“What happened?”

Vox resisted the urge to touch his neck. “Just... didn’t work out.”

“*You* tried to redeem sinners?” Viagra asked slowly, sceptically.

Vox nodded then grimaced. “Uh... I guess. Like I said, didn’t really work out.”

“He was under quite a bit of stress at the time,” Alastor said. “I imagine it might have worked out if he had been able to focus on the hotel fully.”

Vox flicked his gaze to Alastor curiously and Alastor flashed him a smirk. What was he up to...?

Charlie looked between them and Vagina narrowed her eyes. “Since when were you two... *friends*?”

“Oh, Vaggie! Vox is an old chum of mine!”

Vaggie. It was *Vaggie*.

“I thought you two were trying to destroy each other,” Vaggie said, deadpan.

Alastor rocked onto his toes, smiling widely and *oh, he was up to something*.

“Nonsense! Vox is a good friend, aren’t you, dear?”

Dear. That was the second time Alastor had called him that today. The slight falter in Alastor’s smile told him that it was another slip.

Vox smirked. “Certainly am, darling,” he teased and Alastor’s eyes widened a fraction, ears swivelling towards Vox in surprise, and a grin blossomed over Vox’s face.

Charlie and Vaggie shared a glance that had Alastor looking even more flustered and Vox chuckled and turned to them.

“Alastor and I used to be close pals before we *fell out*. But recently we’ve come to realise that it was all a huge misunderstanding and we’re trying to... fix things.”

Charlie’s eyes were huge and round and even Vaggie seemed to soften a little.

“*Aww,*” Charlie cooed. “That is so sweet! And I love that you’re trying to rekindle the flame between you both - y’know, I always thought you two had great chemistry-”

Alastor interrupted her with a strained laugh. “I think you may have the wrong impression of us, Princess.”

Charlie glanced between them both, looking startled and Vox smiled lopsidedly. He idly wondered why it didn't bother him that Charlie had misjudged his relationship with Alastor. He eyed the Radio Demon for a moment and bit back a laugh at the stressed embarrassment dancing behind his eyes despite his wide smile. Honestly, after everything they had faced, what did it matter if someone assumed they were romantically involved? There were far worse rumours about *both* of them.

Although, Vox had to admit that he quite liked the rumour about him having a plug for a tail. It was rather creative.

He realised the room had gone quiet and that he had been staring at Alastor for the duration of his wandering thoughts. Alastor grinned at him, gaze growing more flustered by the second, and Charlie and Vaggie shared another look.

"Vox," Alastor said quietly, *pointedly*, and after facing off against the king earlier, Vox found his confidence at a high, playfulness growing at Alastor's discomposure.

"Yes, sugarplum?" Vox asked innocently and Alastor's cheeks darkened, ears drooping before swinging upright again as his expression flitted between a frustrated frown and pure horror.

Vox laughed and smiled lazily at Charlie, deciding to be merciful. "Sorry, Princess. There aren't any *flames* between us, unless you want to believe the rumours of my entirely inappropriate, obsessive, unrequited crush on him," he said, winking.

Alastor snorted and Charlie deflated a little but her gaze remained warm and kind.

"Well, I believed them until now," Vaggie muttered and Alastor shot her a disdainful sneer.

"Why does everyone assume it's unrequited-" He cut himself off abruptly, nearly biting his own tongue off and Charlie and Vaggie snapped their gazes to him in bewilderment.

Vox turned to Alastor slowly, unable to prevent the wicked grin sweeping across his face.

Alastor closed his eyes, humiliated static thick in the air.

“I tried,” Vox teased, unable to help himself.

Alastor shot him a withering glare. “Fuck you.”

Delighted laughter erupted from Vox as Charlie and Vaggie shared a look that said they *definitely* thought Vox and Alastor were an item, so Vox smirked, watching Alastor’s ears lower in anticipation for the imminent comeback.

“Take me to dinner first,” Vox drawled, and Alastor pursed his lips and averted his gaze, clearly sulking.

Vox searched for a familiar harmony and watched Alastor’s shoulders relax a fraction as their frequencies settled together quickly.

“If it’s this easy to make you die of embarrassment, I’d have called you *pretty* in all of our battles,” Vox teased and suddenly, Alastor’s frequency grated against his, static biting at Vox’s skin as he grimaced and flinched almost imperceptibly.

Vox’s amusement faded and he watched Alastor carefully before his tone grew more serious and he straightened as he turned to the oblivious Vaggie and Charlie.

“Well, I’d better get going. Send me the video when you’re finished and I’ll have my team polish it before it airs.” He tipped his head in a small bow. “Good afternoon, Princess. Vaggie.”

He turned, sending a burst of apologetic static towards Alastor for apparently pushing too far. Alastor was silent until Vox reached the door.

“I was thinking that perhaps Vox could help us with the hotel. He’s being quite modest about his experience.” Alastor’s voice grew quieter. “He once filled this hotel with willing guests.”

Vox hesitated by the door.

“He did?” Charlie asked, excited, before she managed to compose herself. “I mean, it would be amazing to have help with the hotel, but Vox has his own company to run and I imagine his time is precious.”

Vox glanced at Alastor from the corner of his eye and the Radio Demon gave him a strange look.

Vox’s chest tightened. “...Are you... proposing a partnership?”

They had been down this road once before and Alastor had rejected him when he had needed his support the most.

Alastor nodded slowly. “If you can spare a little of your precious time for us.”

An ache blossomed in Vox’s heart. “I... I’ll consider it.”

Alastor tipped his head respectfully and Vox nearly lost his breath.

Alastor was *really* trying. This was an apology and a show of vulnerability all rolled into one. It hit Vox that Alastor genuinely did want to fix things between them as much as Vox did himself and he caught the Radio Demon’s gaze and subtly flicked his eyes to the door and back to Alastor.

“I’ll be in touch,” Vox said before he took to the lights and headed to Alastor’s room.

He perched at Alastor’s small bistro table and waited.

A few minutes later, Alastor stepped into the room and Vox stood, then frowned at himself and sat down again, anxiety rolling around his gut. Alastor eyed him warily and took the seat opposite him.

Vox licked his lips, losing his words for a moment. “You flinched,” Vox said quietly. “You know I was teasing, right?”

Closing his eyes, Alastor blew out a soft breath. “I know,” he said tiredly.

Vox rolled the interaction through his mind once more. “You were fine until I called you ‘pretty’.”

Again, Alastor flinched, ears flattening. He turned his head away from Vox slightly.

Vox frowned. “...Purgatory?”

Alastor pressed his lips into a thin line. “Earth.” His filters were off and it was almost jarring to hear his natural voice.

Vox studied him for a moment, watching how he refused to meet his gaze, how he hunched in on himself and kept his head low and submissive and *ashamed*.

Swallowing, Vox placed a hand cautiously on the table, halfway between them both with his palm up.

“Want to tell me how it made you feel?” he asked quietly.

Alastor’s ear flicked but he didn’t raise his head or attempt to look at Vox.

“Has anyone ever asked you how that night made you feel?” Vox whispered.

Alastor squeezed his eyes shut, ears pinned back as he hunched even further. His shoulders trembled and he remained silent.

“Tell me,” Vox breathed.

Alastor shook his head.

“Why not?” Vox asked gently. “Do you think it’ll change my opinion of you?”

Alastor began to shake and suddenly dropped his face into his hands, hiding himself. He nodded stiltedly.

“You’ll leave. Like Harriet,” Alastor said so quietly that Vox almost missed it.

“I won’t,” Vox whispered. “I promise. Tell me, Al. Tell me how that night makes you feel.”

Alastor suddenly stood and marched towards the door.

“Don’t you *dare* walk away from me again,” Vox said calmly, still sitting at the table with his hand upon it. “Tell me you’re not ready to talk, tell me you need time, tell me it isn’t something you want to share with me, but don’t you *dare* leave. I deserve better than that.”

Alastor froze and turned slowly to Vox. His cheeks were tear stained.

“I care about you,” Vox said, “but I won’t let you treat me like shit again, no matter how you’re feeling.”

Alastor blinked, shoulders sagging. “If I leave first, that means you can’t,” he confessed quietly.

“If you leave, you’ll never see me choose to *stay*,” Vox said, pain lancing his chest. He wished someone had chosen to stay for *him*.

Alastor hesitated then crossed the room and took a seat once more. A breath of relief left Vox unexpectedly and Alastor frowned, guilt clear in his eyes. He glanced at Vox’s upturned palm.

“Tell me about this offer of partnership,” Vox said instead.

Alastor stared at Vox’s hand. “...I’d like to see you more,” Alastor whispered, taking Vox entirely off guard. Alastor finally met Vox’s gaze and he looked distressed. “Fifty years ago, you asked me to become your temporary business partner, and I said *no*. I shouldn’t have.”

Vox shook his head slowly. “Alastor, that was... It wasn’t important. I was low and exhausted, I was overwhelmed by my deal with Roo and I’d just found out Val was cheating on me... When I came to you, I was-”

“Asking for help,” Alastor finished firmly. “You were asking me for help. And I said *no*. I left you to figure everything out by yourself, left you to enact her orders alone. I should have helped you.”

Vox's gaze softened. "You didn't know. And I attacked you, I fought you... You had no reason to help me."

"I should have listened better," Alastor said firmly. "I should have seen that you were exhausted and afraid. I should have *helped*. I'm sorry, Vox."

For a moment, Vox found himself lost for words and something small knitted itself back together in his chest - an old wound that had been festering for far too long. He dropped his gaze to his upturned palm and flexed his fingers.

"...I needed you," Vox whispered, choked with emotion.

Alastor curled his fingers around Vox's. "I know. I should have paid more attention, but I was too preoccupied with my own stubborn pride to see how scared and desperate you were."

Vox licked his lips and tightened his hold on Alastor. "We were both hurting. We were both idiots."

Alastor managed a small smile but it soon grew strained. "You have every right to say no. You have every right to reject the proposal, but I'd like to see you more, Vox. I want you to feel welcome in the hotel, without fear of consequences. I want you to feel safe here."

Safe in Alastor's territory.

The least Vox could do was extend the same offer.

He squeezed Alastor's hand. "Join the Vees," he whispered. "You could walk through the Entertainment District without fear of confrontation."

Alastor's ears lowered and he dropped his gaze, withdrawing his hand, and agony lanced Vox's chest as he leaned away from the Radio Demon.

“Why not?” he demanded angrily. “Why is the idea of joining my side, of *helping me*, so repulsive to you? Why is it so easy for you keep rejecting-”

“It isn’t about *you*, Vox,” Alastor said sharply and Vox bristled.

“Who the fuck else would it be about?”

“Valentino,” snapped Alastor, ears flat and Vox froze, eyes widening in realisation.

Alastor sighed softly and traced a finger over Vox’s palm. “I will support *you*. I’m happy to visit you in V-Tower, I don’t even mind Velvette, but I won’t support the Vees. I won’t be seen allying myself with them and I want no part in Valentino’s foul *business*. ”

Vox swallowed and Alastor raised his gaze to meet Vox’s. “Are you aware of how Valentino collects new souls? Angel told me of how Valentino forced the contract. He didn’t give Angel a choice,” Alastor said quietly. “He stripped away his free will.”

“I heard about Angel,” Vox admitted, suddenly feeling rather hot and uncomfortable. “I don’t get involved with Val’s deals, but I’m pretty sure Angel was an exception because they were... *together* at the time. Val can be possessive. He was making sure Angel remained his.”

Alastor’s expression hardened. “It isn’t just Angel. I’ve seen him force contracts before. Angel has confirmed that he’s done the same to others. He uses his saliva to prevent them from saying no to him. You can’t possibly *support* that?”

Vox shifted in his seat, mouth drawing into a thin line, but Alastor wasn’t finished.

“And surely you can’t support what those contracts entail? You must know what he does to the souls he owns - what he does to his *favourites*, like Angel?” Alastor asked, mouth curling in disgust. “They can’t say no to him and I doubt he’d stop if they did.”

Vox couldn't hold Alastor's gaze any longer and he flinched, pulling his hand away from Alastor's. He knew for a fact that Valentino - if he ever for some reason *didn't* drug the employees he slept with - wouldn't stop if they asked him to.

Because when Vox asked him to stop when things got a little too rough between them, he nearly *always* had to shock the moth-demon to get him to listen. Valentino's underlings didn't have Vox's electricity to aid them.

"What he does with the souls he owns isn't my business," Vox muttered, even as nausea rolled around his stomach. When had Valentino turned into the very monster he had so despised all those decades ago? When had Vox stopped caring what Valentino did?

Alastor smiled sharply, and it wasn't a *nice* smile. "Considering you profit off what he does with his souls, I should think that it is very much *your business*."

Vox scowled. "During working hours, maybe, but what he does with them in his free time, in *their* free time has nothing to do with me. During working hours, they film porn. That's what they signed up for. I'm doing nothing wrong - they knew what they were getting into."

"Except when they say *no* to Valentino, he forces a contract anyway!" Alastor hissed. "*Like Angel*."

Vox opened his mouth and shut it again, an uneasy feeling in his stomach. "There's nothing I can do to stop him, Alastor. We're partners. Part of the deal was that he provided content for VoxTek to air - it was never specified how he recruited actors."

"You can absolutely do something," Alastor said with a false smile. "You can stop airing his *filth*. You can stop giving him a reason to *recruit*."

Vox scowled and hunched his shoulders. "It was part of our contract that I air what he produces. I can't just... stop because I don't like the recruitment process."

Alastor fixed him with an angry glare. “So, if he came to me tonight and drugged me into saying yes to a contract, then forced me to star in the humiliating *depravity* that he forces Angel into every day... you’d simply air it and not say a damn thing to him?”

Vox froze, blood turning to ice. “That wouldn’t happen. You’re stronger than him.”

“No, I’m fucking not!” Alastor snarled, gesturing to the hidden wound slashing through his chest and stomach. “If he came to me right now, I would barely be able to defend myself! And you’re telling me that you’d let him defile me, that you’d let him violate me both on and off camera and you’d *air* it for all of Hell’s entertainment!”

“Never,” Vox said quickly as he shook his head. “I’d never let him do that.” Bile crawled up his throat at the thought. “I’d never do that to you.”

“You’re already letting him do it to other sinners though,” Alastor said lowly. “Who’s to say that he won’t target me next? Or Velvette? Or dear Rosie?” Alastor scowled, leaning back in his chair. “When did you stop caring about the quality of the shows you produce? When did you stop treating your employees as people? You’re an *Overlord*, Vox - you’re supposed to *protect* the souls on your chain. It’s a two-way street, not merely what they can do for you.”

Vox’s throat was dry, but he still managed to frown. “Valentino isn’t allowed to touch any of my souls. I *do* protect them. I haven’t entirely stopped caring.”

Alastor’s shoulders relaxed a fraction but Vox felt sick. Alastor was *right*. When had he stopped focusing on the quality of his shows? When had he let Valentino change from tasteful soft porn of himself and a few select actors, to the vile filth that he filmed these days?

Some of those actors and actresses hadn’t wanted to join the set, but Valentino had drugged them and forced them into a contract anyway.

Vox’s fans flipped on, eyes blowing wide.

Fuck.

He aired footage of sinners being *raped*.

It had never occurred to him before. He caught Alastor's hard gaze for a moment and suddenly pitched to the side and vomited over the floor. His mind wandered to the times he had caught Valentino in bed with a very drugged Angel - the times he had merely rolled his eyes and shut the door behind him - and suddenly, a wounded Alastor replaced the image of Angel, drugged and dazed and unwilling beneath Valentino's larger body.

He vomited again and his screen glitched as his static grew thick and frantic.

"Shit, shit, shit," Vox whispered under his breath as his systems began to overheat, warning messages pinging up at him urgently as the room swayed. He put a hand over his rolling stomach and another over his glitching screen and he heaved again, the acid burning his throat.

What if Valentino was doing the same to Velvette? What if she was just putting on a brave face? What if he was *hurting* her and Vox had turned a blind eye to it because it '*wasn't his business*'?

And Valentino had a reputation. Angel wasn't quiet about it. A lot of sinners openly complained about Valentino, were openly *traumatised* about what he did to them. People had to know that some of the actors in Valentino's porn were unwilling.

More warning messages popped up and Vox ignored them.

No wonder the other Overlords hated the Veeps. They had a *reputation* - and it wasn't the one Vox had been trying to craft; of unrivalled power and trustworthy security and quality entertainment.

Their image was one of cruelty and depravity and paranoia.

“Shit,” Vox choked out before he dry-heaved, stomach empty. “Why the fuck didn’t I stop him?” His voice was heavily filtered and his vision grew black around the edges as his core temperature rose too high. He could vaguely smell smoke.

Someone was pulling at his tailcoat. He lifted his gaze sluggishly to find Alastor looking rather alarmed as he worked frantically to slide Vox’s coat off and unbutton his waistcoat before ridding him of his tie. He started undoing Vox’s shirt and the Television Demon stiffened and gripped his wrists painfully tight.

Alastor stared at him fearfully before his ears lowered and he gritted his teeth. “Vox, calm down.”

Vox lowered his gaze to where he was grasping Alastor’s wrists, working bruises into the delicate skin there. His breath hitched and he released Alastor, feeling nauseous all over again.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, the dark edges of his vision creeping inwards as he suddenly felt extremely hot and unsteady.

“Vox, take it easy,” Alastor said urgently and he reached for Vox’s shirt again.

Vox leaned away from him. “Don’t!”

“You’re smoking!” Alastor hissed and when he undid Vox’s second button, Vox smacked him hard across the face.

Alastor recoiled, looking betrayed as he rubbed his cheek, and Vox clutched his stomach, eyes blowing wide with horror.

Then, everything went black.

Vox awoke slowly and to at least a dozen error messages.

He opened his eyes and realised he was in the dark, lying on a bed.

It took him a moment to realise *whose* bed.

He jerked upright and instinctively checked to see if Alastor had removed his shirt, and he blew out a breath of relief when he realised that he was still clothed. He relaxed a fraction and caught sight of a dim orange glow in the far corner of the room.

He jumped when he found Alastor watching him silently, an open book in his hand.

“You overheated,” Alastor said after a little while, frowning.

Vox glanced down at where his shirt had become burned and blackened near his vents. He smiled bitterly. “Computers do that sometimes.”

Alastor’s frown deepened. “You melted components in your screen.”

“My head feels fine.” In fact, it was about the only part of him that didn’t ache or burn or throb .

“I fixed them,” Alastor said. “You’ve been unconscious for four hours.”

Vox blinked and finally noticed the screwdriver and damaged components on the table in front of Alastor, and the small box of replacement components at his feet - *Vox's* box of components that he kept at V-Tower. "...You manually replaced them."

"My powers are still restricted," Alastor sneered before he narrowed his eyes. "You wouldn't let me remove your shirt. It would have helped to keep you cool."

Vox propped himself against the headboard and studied Alastor for a moment. "Thought you didn't do modern technology?"

"Would you prefer me to have left you *broken*?" Alastor asked with a strained smile. *Like the last fifty years*, went unsaid but not unheard.

Vox crossed his legs. "Thank you." He frowned at the sheets, waiting for the inevitable question.

"Why wouldn't you let me remove your shirt?"

He bristled and glowered at Alastor. "Why did you pull away when I called you *pretty*?"

Alastor stiffened and bared his teeth defensively. "You're avoiding the question."

"Maybe I'm afraid you'll carve into my body like you did in Purgatory," Vox snarled. "Maybe I'm fucking repulsed by the idea of you touching me!"

Alastor straightened and they glared at one another for a long moment before they both dropped their gazes.

Finally, Vox wrapped his arms around himself. "Maybe I don't want you to see what's under there," he confessed softly.

He could feel Alastor's eyes on him. "Why not?"

"Because I fucking don't, okay?" Vox snapped, unable to meet Alastor's gaze as he hugged himself a little tighter. "Because I'm a damn freak."

"Vox-"

"Drop it," Vox growled as he raised his hypnotic gaze. Alastor blinked and tried to fight the command, but he eventually gave in and Vox ended the trance, leaving Alastor looking slightly dazed. The Radio Demon shook his head and narrowed his eyes at Vox and Vox averted his gaze miserably.

A tense silence fell between them.

A few minutes later, Alastor got up and shuffled around the room and Vox contemplated slinking back to V-Tower since he had clearly overstayed his welcome.

He was surprised when the bed dipped and a glass of whisky was pressed into his hand. He took it and looked at Alastor curiously as the Radio Demon settled beside him, propping himself up against the headboard and being careful not to spill his own whisky. It was more difficult to make out his features now that he wasn't under the glow of the lamp, so Vox turned to him, allowing his screen to illuminate his face.

Alastor slowly turned to meet his gaze.

"It made me feel ashamed," Alastor said softly, voice barely a whisper.

Vox frowned briefly in confusion before he understood what Alastor was referring to. He raised his eyebrows.

“I felt humiliated,” Alastor continued, holding Vox’s gaze. “I still do.” He hesitated, collecting his thoughts. “I feel... soiled. Broken. It’s like having dirt under my skin that I can never wash clean. Those men haunt my dreams, even now. Their voices, their hands... They claimed me in every way possible and I still remember their touch like it happened yesterday. The pain and degradation and-”

He cut himself off and shook his head in disgust. “And the way my own body responded. How I *reacted* to their touch as though I enjoyed the violation. As though I enjoyed them urinating and spitting on me. As though I enjoyed the stickiness of my own blood, the ache of the bruises they painted over my body... Harriet was right; I must have been rotten from the start, sick-minded, vile and wicked and-”

“Alastor-”

“She was right to leave. I would have corrupted her. I would have tainted her with my filth-”

“Alastor-”

“My parents would be *ashamed* to see what I let them do to me, what I let myself become. They would *hate* me-”

“*Alastor-*”

“I wasn’t strong enough to fight back. I *enjoyed* it, perhaps even secretly *wanted* it. I deserved those seven years in purgatory. I deserve to be punished. I never wanted to go to Heaven because I couldn’t bear to see the disappointment and disdain on my parents’ faces-”

Vox reached up and brushed his fingers over a flat ear as tears spilled down Alastor’s cheeks, his shoulders tight and body trembling.

Immediately Alastor stiffened and tried to roll away, but he tipped his drink over himself in the process and it was enough of a distraction for Vox to carefully pluck the empty glass from

his fingers and hold his hand instead, rubbing his thumb over his knuckles.

“You didn’t want it,” Vox whispered and Alastor’s gaze snapped to him, humiliated and vulnerable. “You didn’t ask for it,” Vox continued. “You didn’t deserve it. You fought back. You wouldn’t have done that if you enjoyed it.”

“I climaxed,” Alastor whimpered. “Over and over again. While they were inside me and playing with me and hitting me... I *came*. I *must* have enjoyed it.”

“You didn’t,” Vox whispered. “It was an automatic response. Pure friction. You had no choice - you couldn’t have stopped it.”

“Because I wasn’t strong enough,” Alastor whined. “Because I wasn’t enough of a man, like Harriet said. A real man would have fought them off, he wouldn’t have *let them* violate him. But I’m not... I was never... I would never have been a good husband. She’s right, I couldn’t even protect myself, let alone *her*. I failed her, I failed my parents-”

“You,” growled Vox as he tangled their fingers together, “are the strongest fucking man I’ve ever met. *She* failed *you*, Alastor. She wasn’t there for you when you needed her most. She was supposed to love you through the highs and lows but she gave up at the first hurdle because *she* was weak. She’s the one who wasn’t good enough, she’s the one who couldn’t cope. You were supporting her when she was supposed to be supporting you.”

Vox squeezed Alastor’s hand. “And you didn’t *let* them do anything! They were the vile ones, the wicked ones. It took three of them to hold you down because you were so strong, so fierce and determined. Your parents would be *proud* of you.”

Vox grinned viciously. “*And* you got the final laugh. You *killed* them, Alastor. They died by your hand because you’re so fucking clever and brave and *strong*. How many people did you protect by killing them, hm? That bitch doesn’t know what she’s talking about. She wasn’t good enough for you.”

Alastor stared at Vox with wide, attentive eyes.

“You,” Vox whispered as he gingerly reached for a fluffy ear, giving Alastor time to pull away, “are amazing. You didn’t just survive, Alastor, you *fought*. You *thrived*. Despite everything, despite that night, despite losing your parents, despite being abandoned by your bitch of a fiancée, despite being shot and ending up down here looking like *prey*, despite a century of being abused by that evil monster, despite being trapped in Purgatory for seven *years*... you’re still fighting, you’re still plotting, you’re still as clever and cunning and powerful as you’ve always been - if not *more so*.”

His hand hovered beside Alastor’s ear and his breath hitched when Alastor leaned into him desperately, rubbing his ear into Vox’s palm like an attention-starved puppy.

“You are so fucking perfect,” Vox breathed without thinking and Alastor froze and stared at him in surprise for a moment before he placed his hand over Vox’s and showed Vox how he wanted to be petted.

Vox squeezed and massaged and stroked Alastor’s ear with a pink-tinged screen and Alastor’s eyes slipped shut in relief.

“I’ve missed you,” Alastor whispered. “I’ve missed *this*.”

Vox’s chest ached and he sidled a fraction closer to Alastor, still being careful not to touch any part of Alastor’s body that he hadn’t consented to. He paced the whisky glasses on the bedside table and caught one of Alastor’s hands with his free one.

“Tell me what you’ve missed,” Vox demanded quietly and Alastor’s smile widened slightly as he opened an eye.

“I’ve missed you touching me. I’ve missed having you show me that touch doesn’t have to be rough or painful or violating or demanding. I’ve missed having you show me what gentleness feels like. What affection feels like. I’ve missed feeling *safe* around you.”

Vox's throat dried up and his hand slid to Alastor's cheek, wiping away his tears. Alastor stiffened and Vox gave him an apologetic frown before returning to his ear once more.

"I want that," Vox said firmly. "I want that again. I want us to be able to trust each other again. I want to be able to dance with you again. I want to be able to hold you without you flinching away and I want you to prove to me that you won't hurt me again - that you won't beat me half to death or set your shadow on me or carve into my flesh. I'm so tired of us fighting."

Alastor swallowed. "I... I don't know if I can do all that again, Vox. Just because I've missed you, it doesn't mean I can just..." He trailed off, looking pained.

Vox frowned and squeezed the base of his ear the way he knew Alastor liked. "We need a system," he muttered, thoughts racing. "Something so I don't push you too far..."

He clicked his fingers, an excited grin lighting his face. "Traffic lights!"

Alastor blinked.

"You know... If I do something you like, the light stays *green*, if you're not sure about something, you say *yellow*, and we'll pause or go back to the part you liked, and if you're really uncomfortable, you say *red*, and I'll stop. Or, just say *stop*."

Alastor licked his lips. "In my experience, telling people to *stop* doesn't tend to work."

Vox's grin faded and he frowned, heart aching and burning with rage all at once. "It'll work with me. I promise."

Alastor looked at him thoughtfully. "These 'traffic lights' work both ways? You'll use them too?"

Vox's gaze softened. "If I have to."

Alastor nodded slowly. "Alright. That sounds... efficient."

With a grin, Vox squeezed Alastor's ear again. "Want to test it out?" At Alastor's curious look, Vox swept the Radio Demon's hair from his face.

"Red, yellow, or green?"

Alastor blinked. "Green."

Vox hummed and carded his fingers through Alastor's hair. "Red, yellow, or green?"

"Green."

No hesitation. Vox huffed in amusement and toyed with an ear.

"Green."

Vox laughed softly. He played with the ear for a little while before his smile faded into something more serious and he carefully moved his hand to Alastor's cheek and laid it there.

Alastor's brows twitched.

"Red, yellow, or green?" Vox whispered.

Alastor hesitated.

“If you aren’t sure, say *yellow*,” Vox murmured. “This won’t work if we aren’t honest with each other.”

“Yellow,” Alastor whispered and Vox slid his hand up to Alastor’s ear once more. Alastor’s shoulders relaxed.

“Better?”

Alastor nodded, looking frustrated with himself.

“Hey,” Vox murmured, earning Alastor’s attention. “None of that. There’s no rush. We’ll figure it out. Together.”

They basked in one another’s company for a while, studying each other for a few minutes, relearning the gentle affection that had once come so easy to them both, the *comfort* they had freely shared decades earlier.

A smirk spread slowly across Alastor’s face. “None of this changes anything though, right?”

Vox snorted. “Right. Not a thing has changed.”

They grinned at each other and Vox was surprised when Alastor carefully guided his hand to his cheek.

“Green,” he whispered as his eyelids slipped shut and if Vox’s pupils briefly took the form of hearts before he hastily forced them into their normal shape, there was no one to witness it.

“Perhaps something has changed,” Vox whispered into the darkness.

Alastor's smile widened as he leaned into Vox's palm. "Perhaps."

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: In the second section, Alastor talks about how being assaulted makes him feel and he gets into his own head a little before Vox puts a stop to it.

Look at them bonding ;)

Chapter 40: Won't Back Down Without A Fight

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“I can’t believe you forgot to take your filter off.”

“It’s the end of one scene. It can be cut.”

“You look like something out of a horror movie with zero budget.”

“*I forgot.*”

“*The Matrix* but with Eldritch villains.”

“You say that like I understand the reference.”

The doors flew open and Velvette stormed into the room, flicking her pigtails behind her shoulders.

“Vox! Valentino is throwing another of his tantrums and I need you to-” She cut herself off and blinked at the sight of Vox and Alastor leaning back against the couch in Vox’s bedroom; Vox’s arm strewn casually behind Alastor and Alastor with his arms crossed, their knees almost brushing.

They both raised an eyebrow at her in unison and Velvette’s mouth opened and closed for a few seconds like a fish out of water before she folded her arms and smirked.

“Congratulations on getting that deer ass.”

Vox rolled his eyes. “Mind out of the gutter. We’re actually working.”

Velvette’s smirk widened. “*We?* Since when did Alastor join the payroll?”

“Actually, Vox is helping me,” Alastor drawled. “With the hotel.”

“And you definitely need it, Mister *This Face Was Made For Radio* .”

“Oh, hush you. I’m sure your editing team can cut it.”

Velvette cocked an eyebrow.

“The great and powerful Radio Demon forgot to make his face visible while he was filming his advertisement for the hotel,” Vox scoffed and he gestured for Velvette to join them.

“Come here. Come look at this B-rated horror trailer.”

“It isn’t that bad,” Alastor protested. “It’s *one* scene.”

“In a *ninety-second commercial*, ” Vox pointed out before he smiled charmingly and adopted a presenting voice. “Come to the Hazbin Hotel! Start your mornings by working towards redemption through our personalised trust exercises, have a relaxing drink at our well-stocked bar in the afternoons, and at night, our hotelier will stand at the foot of your bed and scare the ever-loving shit out of you!”

Alastor rolled his eyes. “That would make things far more entertaining.”

“The princess might argue with that,” Vox teased as Velvette huffed a laugh at Alastor’s distorted image on-screen.

“Well, can’t say I expected any better from a dusty-ass fossil,” she said sweetly.

“Don’t you have homework due at school tomorrow?” Alastor fired back, earning himself a middle finger from Velvette.

“Fuck you, old man. Unlike you, I’ve actually got a degree.”

“And does it have *your* name on it?” Alastor drawled.

“Aww, are the cataracts making it difficult to read in your old age?”

Alastor snorted and cast his gaze to a grinning Vox. “She’s *exhausting*. How do you put up with her?”

“I usually just turn my hearing aid off.”

Velvette propped her hands on her hips. “I’ll stop by with your pudding cups later, assholes.” Her smirk faded and she fixed Vox with an almost apologetic look. Her voice softened a fraction. “Valentino’s asking for you.”

Vox’s smile faltered. “I’m busy. He’ll have to wait.”

“You know he hates waiting.”

“I can’t just drop everything whenever he calls. He’ll have to learn to wait,” Vox growled.

Velvette was quiet for a moment before her gaze flitted to Alastor and back to Vox once more. “He’s going to be worse if he knows you blew him off for Alastor.”

Vox smiled sharply, fingers twitching towards Alastor’s shoulder before he managed to restrain himself. “I don’t give a flying fuck. He can damn well wait.”

Alastor’s knee knocked against his and he turned his attention quickly to the Radio Demon. “I’ve taken enough of your time, Vox. You have a business to run. I’ll reshoot that last scene and I’ll be in touch.”

“Now, hang on,” Vox protested as Alastor began to rise from the couch. “He doesn’t get a say in who I decide to spend my time with. Let him throw his tantrum. He’ll wear himself out eventually.”

“He’s threatening to shoot your employees again,” Velvette sighed and Vox bristled.

“Asshole,” he growled under his breath, clenching his fists. “Fine. If he wants to talk, we’ll talk.”

Velvette winced before nodding. “I’ll let him know you’ll be up shortly.” She left and Alastor stood, stretching his back out elegantly. Vox flexed his fingers, itching to touch.

Alastor caught the movement from the corner of his eye and tipped his head slowly, offering Vox an ear. Vox immediately buried his fingers in the soft fur, petting Alastor as though he was his personal therapy dog. He still couldn’t quite believe he was allowed to do this, that he was allowed to *touch*.

“I could stay here if you like?” Alastor offered after a moment as he leaned into Vox’s gentle fingers. “In case he gets a tad trigger happy?”

Vox stilled, startled by the offer. He *almost* took it. “Better not. If Val sees you’re here... Well, you’re in no fit state for a battle. Go home, Al.”

His breath hitched when Alastor carefully brushed his fingers down the edge of his screen. “If he hurts you, you come straight to the hotel,” Alastor growled softly and Vox quickly caught his hand and pressed it against the edge of his screen.

“Fuck,” he breathed, leaning desperately into Alastor’s palm. He opened his eyes to find Alastor staring at him, heartache and guilt in his gaze.

“Uh... sorry,” Vox said, embarrassed at his own desperation and he reluctantly released Alastor’s hand, only for the Radio Demon to cup both sides of his screen.

Vox swallowed as Alastor traced the edges of his screen with curious fingers.

“What are you sorry for?” Alastor asked softly.

Vox grinned weakly. “Ah... For being pathetic?”

Alastor blinked slowly, like a contented cat, and he continued to follow the edges of Vox’s screen. “Oh? What do you mean?” One hand disappeared around the back of Vox’s head, exploring the tiny vents and crevices there before brushing over a port.

Vox jerked backwards and Alastor studied him for a moment before stepping towards him again and raising his hands to his screen. “Colour?”

It took a moment for Vox to understand. “Uh... green.”

Alastor smiled lazily and grazed his fingers across the top of Vox’s screen. “I do miss your antennae.”

“...Really?”

Alastor nodded, humming softly as he glanced at Vox’s discarded hat on the coffee table, the antennae jutting out of its top.

“Why?”

“I liked them,” Alastor said simply and Vox’s heart stuttered.

“Would you like me to put them back?”

Alastor stilled, looking at Vox curiously. “You can do that?”

Vox snorted. “I’m ninety-percent machine. I can modify myself however I like.”

A frown creased Alastor’s brows. “You have a tendency to refer to yourself as a machine quite a lot, did you know that?”

“I’m basically a bunch of modified spare parts welded together,” Vox scoffed. “I *am* a machine.”

Alastor scowled and brushed a port at the back of his head again and Vox jumped backwards once more. “Yellow.”

Alastor’s hands fell to his sides. “May I ask why?”

“It’s just a hole in the back of my head,” Vox said with an uncomfortable shrug. “It’s weird.”

“It’s part of you,” Alastor replied and Vox frowned.

“Exactly. It’s weird. Pitfalls of being made of circuit boards, I guess.”

“Why is it a pitfall?”

“What is this? Twenty questions?” Vox huffed before he shook his head. “Look, I’ve got to see Val-”

“I like it.”

Vox’s throat dried up before he snorted and waved a hand dismissively. “No you don’t. You’re being polite.”

“Why would I lie to you?”

Vox fixed him with a frustrated frown. “Just stop, Alastor. I know it’s weird. It’s fine. I’m used to it.”

Alastor tilted his head. “Turn around.”

Vox stiffened. “No.”

“What do you think I’m going to do?”

Vox hesitated and Alastor made a swivelling motion with one finger. Vox licked his lips and slowly turned his back to Alastor, flexing his fingers restlessly.

He flinched as Alastor stepped behind him.

“Relax, Vox,” Alastor said gently. “You’re safe, I promise.”

Vox forced his shoulders to drop but he immediately tensed when Alastor’s fingers swept over the ports at the back of his head.

“Alastor-”

Static raced through one of his ports playfully and Vox immediately snapped his mouth shut, caught by surprise.

“Yes, Vox?” Alastor asked innocently as he moved to the next port and sent another teasing burst of static down it. His thumb skirted around the edges of the port and Vox’s eyes fluttered shut as his chest tightened with something relieved yet overwhelmed.

“Yes, I daresay I quite like these,” Alastor purred as he touched two different ports and allowed a series of rapid-fire pulses of static to flow through them.

A choked sob tore from Vox’s throat and his knees suddenly buckled.

Alastor caught him instinctively, throwing a clumsy arm around his middle to stop him from hitting the floor.

“Vox!” he yelped in alarm.

Vox pressed his hands to his screen before he tried to break free of Alastor’s hold, but he staggered and another choked noise left him, and Alastor’s grip on him tightened.

“Easy,” Alastor whispered against the back of his head. “Take it easy. Tell me what you need. Give me a colour.”

“I don’t know,” Vox whimpered and he realised that he was trembling. He stiffened as he took note of how much of his body was in contact with Alastor’s. “Shit! I’m sorry! I- I...” He jerked forwards then his breath hitched at the loss of Alastor’s warmth and he pushed back into Alastor once more and froze when he felt the Radio Demon tense. “I’m sorry-”

“Stop,” Alastor whispered and Vox tried to tear out of his hold, horrified that he’d pushed Alastor too far, but he was confused when Alastor held him tighter, pressing his head against the back of his screen. “*Breathe*, my dear. Stop thinking.”

My dear.

Vox stilled and focused on Alastor’s warmth, on the comforting squeeze of his arm around his middle and the grounding firmness of his chest against his back and the affectionate press of his forehead against the back of his screen. He focused on the rise and fall of Alastor’s chest and the soft gush of air against his ports with each of his breaths, and then he focused on matching Alastor’s calming frequency, on finding that perfect harmony that would soothe them both.

Slowly, carefully, he slotted his fingers between Alastor’s and when Alastor didn’t move away, he let out a breath.

Alastor relaxed against him and they stood in silence for a few peaceful moments.

“What happened?” Alastor asked quietly against the back of his head. “You almost collapsed.”

Vox toyed with Alastor’s fingers to distract himself, stroking each one and rubbing the knuckles and tracing his nails. “Felt nice,” he managed.

Alastor hummed thoughtfully. “You sounded upset.”

Vox fell quiet, considering his next words cautiously. “I have... a bit of a fucked-up body,” he admitted softly. “In Purgatory, you and Val and my parents had a lot to say about it. You were all... disgusted.” Vox shook his head quickly. “And I get it. It’s not exactly pretty and Purgatory isn’t the only time people have been freaked out by it. No one ever gets used to it and Val fucking *hates* it and I look like some sort of monster from-”

He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his lips together to stop himself from sobbing again. “It’s just... not pleasant, okay? I guess it’s all part of the torture of being in Hell.”

Alastor’s thumb rubbed soothing circles into his stomach and Vox took a moment to compose himself.

“I wasn’t expecting you to genuinely like my ports,” Vox murmured.

Alastor was quiet for a long time. “I like a lot about you, Vox. Perhaps if you showed me this body you’re so ashamed of-”

“Red.”

Alastor’s jaw clicked shut and Vox realised his own chest was heaving, panic and anxiety welling inside him at an incredible rate. His screen glitched and he had to work to prevent sparks from dancing over his frame and inadvertently burning Alastor.

“Breathe,” Alastor whispered. “You’re okay.” He tightened his grip on Vox and Vox began to wonder whether Alastor needed the comfort as much as he did.

He leaned back against Alastor and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Do you know why I like your antennae and ports so much?” Alastor asked softly after a while.

Vox frowned and shook his head.

“Because,” Alastor whispered, “no other demon responds to my signal the way you do. You *understand* frequencies and airwaves and electricity - they’re part of you because of your ports and antennae. I’ve never met another demon who uses frequency and static as easily and as often as I do.”

He touched one of Vox’s ports, allowing soothing static to trickle deeper into the Television Demon’s body, over circuit boards and through components and brushing delicately along his nervous system. Vox’s shoulders sagged with relief.

“You *understand*,” Alastor breathed. “This is as much a part of you as it’s a part of me and no one else seems to understand how important it is, how *incredible* it is, how *lonely* it is when yours is the only signal in the room.”

Vox shivered a little before slotting their fingers together once more and finding that sweet harmony with Alastor’s frequency.

Alastor blew out a long breath and let his static nip teasingly at Vox’s skin, blanketing him, *drowning* him, and Vox let himself be swept away, answering the call with his own affectionate static.

“I have *missed* you so dearly, Vox,” Alastor whispered into the back of his head.

Vox swallowed thickly and squeezed his eyes shut and allowed Alastor to hold him.

“In Purgatory you were silent,” Alastor continued, voice low and calming. “I forgot how *loud* you are. I forgot how your static feels against my skin. I forgot how soothing your frequency is. I forgot all of your wonderful little quirks. How did I forget?”

Vox cocked his head thoughtfully. Looking back to his time in Purgatory, Alastor had also been 'silent' - no static, no natural frequency that changed with his emotion...

What else had Purgatory got wrong about them both?

"I'm tired of being alone," Alastor murmured. "I'm tired of the silence. Of the darkness."

It suddenly occurred to Vox that Alastor slept with a light on these days. Was he... *afraid* of the dark? Did it remind him too much of Purgatory?

"Then don't be alone," Vox said quietly as he squeezed Alastor's hand. "You're welcome here whenever you like. I'll always appreciate your company." He turned his head slightly to peer over his own shoulder. "And my face is basically its own night-light. You'll never be in darkness when I'm in the room." He smirked. "I've got a pretty decent set of speakers on me too if you don't like the quiet."

Alastor pulled back to gaze at him fondly. "Thank you, Picturebox."

Vox's heart fluttered and his eyes widened. He forced the feeling down and managed a smile.

Suddenly, the doors flew open and Vox and Alastor snapped their startled gazes to an equally startled Valentino.

Valentino's expression quickly soured.

"The fuck is this?" he growled as Alastor withdrew from Vox, wary smile in place. "Are you *fucking* this piece of shit now?"

Alastor flinched minutely and a surprising amount of anger bubbled inside Vox.

“We were *talking*, you ass. And you were supposed to wait upstairs. I can’t just drop everything every time you have a temper tantrum. I’m *busy*. ”

Valentino grinned sharply. “I didn’t realise that sucking the Radio Demon’s cock counted as work.” His gaze shifted to Alastor and he sneered. “Maybe we should share the load.”

Alastor stepped backwards, ears falling flat and frequency jumping erratically. Vox bristled, sparks flying off his frame as he slid in front of Alastor.

“Fuck you,” he snarled jabbing a claw in Valentino’s direction. “No, really. *Fuck you*, Valentino. Because you *know*. You know what he’s been through because she told you. And you still have the *audacity* to make shitty comments like that.” Electricity crackled over his fingers. “*Fuck you*. ”

Valentino blinked, seemingly stunned, before he bared his teeth at Vox. “Why do you care? He *broke* you. He left you bleeding in the middle of the street. He’s fought you more times than I can count. He doesn’t give a damn about you, Vox. He’s *using* you. That’s what he does.”

Vox smiled viciously. “And how many times have *you* broken me, Val? How many times have you cracked my screen or made me bleed or left me with so many bruises at night that I can barely walk the next morning? How many times have you called me ‘disgusting’ or ‘freak’ or ‘pathetic’?”

“You are fucking pathetic,” Valentino hissed throwing a hand up at Alastor. “You’re *obsessed* with him. You’re letting your enemy literally fuck you up the ass! Are you that *desperate* for attention? That desperate for someone to touch you?”

Vox clenched his fists, unwilling to admit how much that last comment stung. He glowered at Valentino, the confidence in his tone wavering.

“We were *talking*. ”

“If he sees the shit under your shirt, he’ll never touch you again.”

Vox stiffened, breath hitching.

“You’re a fucking *freak*. He’ll never want you, Vox,” Valentino spat, wings flaring wide and Vox’s tongue dried up as anxiety and fear welled inside his chest, making it difficult for him to breathe.

Valentino wouldn’t.

...Would he?

Vox’s heart raced. *Would* he reveal Vox’s secret? Right here, like this? What if he was correct? What if Alastor found out and he was nauseated by the idea? What if he pulled away from Vox again? What if he abandoned Vox again and Vox was left alone and miserable and cursed by his own repulsive body? What if-

Valentino groaned as he was slammed into the back wall by a shadowy tendril. It wrapped around his neck and pinned him a couple of inches off the floor.

“I think,” Alastor drawled with a sinister smile, “that someone is *jealous*.”

Valentino struggled against Alastor’s shadow.

“You say that Vox is the desperate one, but I think it’s *you* who’s desperate,” Alastor said as he came to stand beside Vox. “I think you’re lashing out at him because you’re afraid of him *abandoning you*.” His grin was deadly and Valentino glowered at him, fists clenching.

“I hope they fucked you bloody.”

Alastor's shadow dissolved as he retreated with wide, stunned eyes. Vox snarled and released an enormous burst of charge in Valentino's direction.

"Piece of shit!" Vox roared as Valentino cried out in agony and crumpled to the floor. Vox prepared another assault but Velvette chose that moment to race into the room and stand between her business partners.

She sent Vox a heated glare. "Leave."

"I'll kill him," Vox snarled, charge crackling over his frame. "He fucking deserves it!"

"Take Alastor back to the hotel," Velvette said coolly.

"I'm not finished with him," Vox said, screen glitching with rage as he set his fiery gaze on the downed Valentino. "Useless whore! You think your boyfriend on Earth was abusive? I'll make him look *loving*."

Valentino shrank back from Vox even as he bared his teeth. "You don't even know what *love* is. Machines aren't capable of it."

"Better than being a fucking *rapist* like you!"

Valentino reared backwards in shock before he leapt to his feet and prowled towards Vox with intimidating, flared wings. "I can't wait for her to drag your pathetic ass back to Purgatory. I hope those trials *destroy* you."

Suddenly, there was the sound of a hundred people talking at once, and Valentino, Vox, and Alastor grimaced at the cacophony of noise inside their heads. Then, a single voice rose from the chaos in each of their minds, each a different voice, each saying something unique to each man, clear yet unfamiliar.

'Take Alastor home,' said a voice above the racket of a hundred other people - a voice that Vox couldn't quite place, and he struggled against the command before giving up and deciding that it was a good idea.

He touched Alastor's wrist, gentle and comforting, and Alastor squinted at him through the chaos in his own mind and nodded slowly before dissolving into the shadows. Vox raced into the lights a moment later and once he arrived in the hotel, safe in Alastor's room, the voices cut off and Vox pulled a face.

"Influence," answered Vox when Alastor looked at him curiously. "Y'know, because social media is her whole *thing*. She can influence people's thoughts."

Alastor raised his eyebrows. "She's... surprisingly powerful."

Vox huffed. "She can be. Takes it out of her when she uses it on multiple people at once though. She'll sleep tonight."

Alastor rubbed his head with a frown and Vox took a seat.

"Thought you couldn't summon your shadows?" he muttered.

Alastor dropped into the seat opposite him. "I couldn't until today." He smiled bitterly. "Obviously, the promise of *confrontation* was too tempting for her to resist."

"She wanted you to beat the shit out of Val?" Vox scoffed and when Alastor shrugged, he huffed a dark laugh. "You should have."

Alastor drummed his fingers over the table and was silent for a long time before he frowned at Vox. "Shouldn't you be on his side? He's your lover, after all."

“He wasn’t supposed to be,” Vox said, scowling, and Alastor’s eyes widened before they slid shut slowly and he sighed.

“...What exactly are you expecting out of this, Vox? Out of *us*? Because I can’t... I can’t give you what Valentino gives you.”

Vox tensed. “I’m not *expecting* anything,” he growled. “Believe it or not, Alastor, I’m actually still pretty hurt over everything you did to me. Everything we used to be is destroyed and we’re both too damaged to ever go back to what we were. We aren’t the same people.”

Alastor’s ears lowered. “You attacked Valentino over me.”

Vox bared his teeth angrily. “Because a long time ago, I *did* actually love you! Because apparently, I still fucking care about you!” His nails bit into his palms. “And that has to count for something.”

It took a long time for Alastor to scrape a reply together and when he did, his gaze was softer than Vox had anticipated.

“A long time ago, I loved you too,” Alastor said gently. “And I’m sorry I never told you. I’m sorry for a lot of things, actually.”

The fight drained from Vox and his shoulders sagged as pain exploded in his chest.

“...You...?” He trailed off and shook his head, throat dry. “No, that’s... Valentino said... In Purgatory, you...”

He was unlovable. He knew that. Purgatory had taught him that. He was a freak, worthless, disgusting, *replaceable*... No one could ever have loved him, especially not Alastor. Valentino said that Alastor would never love him. Valentino said that Alastor would never want him.

“You’re lying,” Vox whispered, voice cracking.

Alastor raised his eyebrows before carefully placing an upturned hand on the table between them.

“There was a time when you were the most important thing in my life,” Alastor said slowly. “I don’t have the words to express just how much you meant to me. You were everything good in my afterlife - a bright light in a sea of darkness. I loved you so fiercely, in a way I had never loved anyone before.” Regret and shame and grief danced behind his eyes. “I only wish I had told you back then.”

Something huge and rotten and agonising in Vox’s chest suddenly melted away after years of decay, and he sucked in a breath. He stared at Alastor’s upturned hand and cautiously slid his own into it. He felt tears pooling at the bottom of his screen as Alastor held onto him tightly.

“Fuck,” Vox whimpered and when he managed to raise his gaze to Alastor’s face, the Radio Demon smiled sadly at him, a single tear escaping down his cheek.

“We could have been happy,” Vox whispered and Alastor’s smile grew pained as he stroked his thumb over Vox’s knuckles.

“Perhaps.”

It felt... strange to speak so freely about their past and suddenly, Vox remembered Alastor’s soft smiles and fond glances and how he had once been so sure that the other demon loved him despite never voicing it.

How had he forgotten that? Why had he let the trials and Valentino convince him that he was unworthy of love and affection when Alastor had once showered him with it?

He *had* been loved. *Deeply*.

He glanced at their linked hands, at how Alastor was stroking his thumb over his knuckles affectionately.

Alastor still cared about him.

Purgatory was *wrong*. Valentino was *wrong*.

Perhaps... Perhaps he wasn't so worthless after all.

"Are you alright, my dear?"

Vox snapped his gaze to Alastor's concerned frown. *Alastor was concerned about him. Alastor cared about him.* "That's the fourth time you've called me that. '*My dear*'."

Alastor blinked and dropped his gaze sheepishly. "Old habits die hard, I'm afraid."

A smile slowly blossomed over Vox's face and he squeezed Alastor's hand. "Green."

For a moment, Alastor looked stunned, then he huffed a laugh - a genuine one, and it was the most beautiful sound that Vox had ever heard. Vox's smile widened.

When he sobered, Alastor's gaze softened into something sad and ashamed. "I should have told you about her sooner," he said quietly. "I should have told you why I didn't want you anywhere near that bookshop. I shouldn't have pushed you away. I shouldn't have made that decision for you. I thought I was protecting you, I thought I could keep you from her, but I was wrong. I'm sorry, Vox. I'm sorry for lashing out at you and for failing to comfort you when you got back."

Vox felt as though he could finally *breathe* for the first time in years. “Yeah, well... I was pretty good at pushing you away too. I wouldn’t listen. I was so angry and paranoid and bitter... I shouldn’t have attacked you. I should have believed you about the possession. I should have stayed by your side instead of turning on you.”

Their gazes met.

“Stay,” Alastor said simply. “Today, tonight, tomorrow... I’ve missed you. I’ve missed your company. I want you to stay.”

Alastor wanted him to stay.

He was wanted.

“Okay.”

Alastor’s shoulders slumped with relief and Vox automatically drew a hand to his cheek to wipe away the stray tear there. Immediately, Alastor leaned into his palm, eyes closed.

Alastor caught Vox’s hand in his own, keeping his palm trapped to his cheek and practically nuzzling into it.

“We can fix this,” Vox breathed, taken off-guard by the determination swelling in his chest. “I want us to be friends again, Al. I want us to fix what we broke. I don’t care how long it takes.” He watched Alastor sigh shakily as he caressed his cheek with his thumb.

Alastor’s fingers slid to his wrist, curling protectively around his pulse point.

“Alright,” Alastor whispered as he drew Vox’s hand to his ear. Vox buried his fingers in soft fur, rubbing, squeezing, massaging until Alastor was a trembling wreck.

A strange sense of possessiveness grew within Vox at Alastor's desperation, and he carded his fingers through fluffy hair, ruffling it until Alastor looked practically undone. He traced Alastor's cheek and jaw before grazing his neck and returning to his ear, and Alastor's breaths shook as he slid his hand up and down Vox's arm in encouragement.

Vox quickly cupped Alastor's other cheek with his opposite hand and Alastor curled his fingers around this arm too, opening his eyes and locking gazes with Vox.

A comfortable silence settled between them.

Suddenly, static rippled playfully up Vox's arm and he laughed and returned the gesture, making the fur of Alastor's ear stand on end. Alastor hummed happily and rubbed his cheek against Vox's palm.

"You're fucking adorable," Vox teased. "Thought you were supposed to be this big, scary, badass Overlord?"

"I am a big, scary, badass Overlord," Alastor muttered as he rubbed his cheek against Vox. *Comfortable. Needy. Content.* "I need a break sometimes."

Vox's chest filled with warmth and he brushed Alastor's hair from his eyes. Alastor melted in his hold and Vox swallowed, overwhelmed with memories of decades earlier.

His gaze dropped to Alastor's mouth, to the smile permanently etched there, and he furrowed his brows and brushed his thumb curiously over Alastor's lips.

Alastor stilled, looking wary. "Vox-"

"Does it hurt?" Vox asked softly before Alastor could get the wrong impression. "Smiling all the time?"

Alastor relaxed. “Yes. I’m accustomed to it now. It’s merely an ever-present ache.”

The emerald stitches faded into view, thick and messy and *tight*. Vox brushed his thumb over one and scowled. They didn’t feel like suture material - they felt like wires; thick cables meant to distort Alastor’s face, to *hurt* him.

“Why can’t you cut them?” Vox asked and Alastor shrugged a shoulder, letting Vox explore the sutures.

“It’s the same magic that keeps my chain locked. They’re another reminder of my contract - of how she *owns* me.”

Alastor looked so *tired*.

Vox smoothed his thumb over Alastor’s lips and over each suture. Fury lapped at his gut.

“We’ll find a way to break them,” he growled. “We’ll find a way to break these damn chains.”

Alastor blinked and met Vox’s fierce gaze, and Vox cupped his cheeks. “I’m sick of her destroying everything *good* in our afterlives. I’m sick of her breaking *us*, over and over, hurting us for fun, turning us against each other...” He swept his thumb over a stitch. “We could have been happy but she took that away from us.”

Alastor’s eyes fluttered shut and he slid his hands over Vox’s and it occurred to him that Alastor craved a gentle touch as much as Vox himself did.

“It’s time we fight back,” growled Vox as he leaned closer to Alastor and he suddenly wished the table wasn’t between them. “It’s time we stand together and defy her. Fix what *she* broke.”

Alastor opened an eye and he smirked. "I thought you said nothing had changed?"

"*Everything* has changed," Vox hissed. "I've got you back and this time, I'm not letting you go." There was a fire in him that hadn't burned in *decades*. They were both scarred and damaged and they weren't the same people they had once been, but even after all the torture and fighting and psychological abuse, they had still crawled their way back to one another.

That had to mean *something*.

They might never be in love again, but that didn't mean they couldn't care for each other. There were different sorts of *love*. They could build their friendship from the ashes of their failed romance, right?

Alastor's ears perked upwards and for a moment, he seemed startled by Vox's determination. Then his grip on Vox's hands tightened. "She'll make us suffer for that sort of attitude," he said quietly, but his eyes were bright and filled with a tentative sort of *hope*.

"She'll make us suffer if we comply," Vox pointed out. "We both know how this ends. We both know if we don't break our chains, we'll die in Purgatory. So let's fight back and if we fail, then at least we go out kicking and screaming. At least we go *together* - it'll piss her off at the very least."

Alastor swallowed and licked his lips and he stared at Vox's face for a long time before his smile widened into something affectionate and sincere.

"Hello, Vox," he breathed.

Vox grinned. "Hello again, old pal."

He felt different. Something inside him had changed, had *healed*, just a little - and Alastor was the cause.

Alastor's hands slid to his wrists, squeezing fondly. "We'll need help."

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Valentino is very insensitive about what happened to Alastor here.

You know who we haven't seen in a while? Someone Vox owes an apology to...
Anyway, I love reading all your comments and theories - you guys are incredible

Chapter 41: Red

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Cannibals swivelled their heads curiously, some snarling at Vox, others scowling in distaste and although Vox kept his head held high as they walked, Alastor could see the tension in his shoulders, the wariness in his gaze.

“Should have stayed in the Entertainment District,” muttered a passerby and when a small group of teens eyed Vox hungrily, licking their lips, Alastor placed a pointed hand on Vox’s back with a pleasant smile.

Every cannibal suddenly continued about their day, barely giving Vox a second glance, and Alastor decided to rest his hand on Vox’s back for the remainder of their journey to the emporium.

And if Vox sidled a little closer to him, Alastor was gracious enough to not comment.

They entered the emporium and Rosie caught sight of him immediately, grinning warmly in greeting.

“Oh, Alastor! What a lovely surpr-”

She froze upon seeing Vox and a thick scowl settled on her features as her hands propped themselves upon her hips.

Vox licked his lips. “I’ve got a lot of apologising to do.”

“I should eat you.”

Vox blinked and rubbed the back of his neck but Rosie noticed where Alastor’s hand lay and she straightened, looking stunned. “So, the rumours are true,” she said, seemingly to herself. “You and Alastor are friends again...”

Vox met her gaze sheepishly. “We’re... working on it.”

“Hm,” replied Rosie, frowning before she shrugged. “Alright then. Let’s hear what you have to say.” She turned on her heel and glided towards the back room and Alastor gently led Vox onward.

“Sit,” ordered Rosie as she set about making tea and Alastor pulled a chair out for Vox, smiling when the Television Demon looked at him nervously. Alastor winked at him and his shoulders eased a fraction as Alastor took the seat beside him.

There was a subtle burst of static at Alastor’s hand - anxious and seeking reassurance, and Alastor smiled lazily at Vox and threw an arm over the back of his chair. He sent a pulse of soothing static into Vox’s shoulder and finally, Vox relaxed.

They looked up to find Rosie observing them silently whilst the tea boiled. She fixed Alastor with a narrow-eyed look and he smiled at her and kept quiet.

She huffed and folded her arms. “The coffee at the Overlord meeting was the start of it?”

Alastor’s smile widened. “The coffee was the start of *something*.”

She set her glare on Vox. “And it’s taken you *this* long to come here? Quite frankly, I’m insulted.”

Vox flinched. “Sorry, Rosie.”

“You can do better than that. How many decades has it been?”

Vox grimaced. “Too many.” He raised his gaze to meet hers. “I’m an ass. A stubborn, arrogant ass who shouldn’t jump to conclusions.”

“Hm.”

“I shouldn’t have said what I said. I should have *listened* to you. I should have apologised sooner.”

“You should have.”

Vox’s eyes slid shut in defeat and he lowered his head slightly. “I’m sorry, Rosie. I really am. I’ve got no excuse.”

Rosie crossed her arms. “You have a Purgatory-sized excuse, I suppose.”

He looked up at her and finally, her gaze softened. “I’ve missed you, you silly picturebox. I was worried about you, but you wouldn’t let me close. Every time I tried to organise an appointment with you at that fancy tower of yours, you rejected my requests. I thought Alastor was stubborn, but I couldn’t get within two miles of you!”

Vox smiled bitterly as Rosie poured their tea. “Purgatory made me a little… paranoid. Distrusting.” He took the cup Rosie offered him and frowned at it. “I’m working on it.”

Unable to help himself, Alastor traced one of the ports on the back of Vox’s screen. “He’s doing very well, might I say,” he drawled, fascinated by how Vox’s eyes fluttered shut as he melted under Alastor’s touch. *So receptive...*

“It looks like you both are,” Rosie said quietly and Alastor stilled in surprise, flicking his gaze to her.

She smiled gently at him. “I’m not blind, Alastor. This is the most relaxed I’ve seen you in a long time.” She grinned, clasping her hands together. “You two have always been so good for each other.”

Alastor and Vox shared a startled look and Rosie waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t act so surprised! You two were miserable when you were fighting. Without each other, you turned into the worst versions of yourselves, but it’s been... what? A few weeks since the coffee? And look at you both! Already so comfortable with each other. Oh, I’m so *proud* of you boys!”

Alastor decided to close his mouth and roll with it. It wouldn’t do to argue with Rosie anyway. He sipped his tea and when Vox opened his mouth to protest, Alastor slid a finger down one of his newly re-installed antennae - the crimped one.

Vox snapped his mouth shut and Alastor smirked and patted his head gently before dropping his arm to the back of Vox’s chair again.

Vox’s hand drifted slowly to Alastor’s knee, hovering above it in question. Alastor bounced his leg, letting his knee knock into Vox’s palm briefly and Vox rested his hand upon the joint with a pleased smile. He squeezed Alastor’s knee before rubbing his thumb over its side, possessive and comforting and Alastor found himself tracing Vox’s ports.

Rosie’s gaze softened. “You two have been through so much... You deserve something good for yourselves. Time to heal.” She scowled suddenly at Vox. “Time away from that horrible moth.”

Vox blinked and Alastor bit back a laugh.

“Things with Val are... complicated,” Vox said slowly and Rosie rolled her eyes.

“Sweetie, there’s nothing complicated about Valentino. He’s a grade A asshole.” She frowned. “He lied to you to get what he wanted. He’s jealous of anyone who tries to get close to you - including *me*. And don’t even get me started on what he’s put Alastor through. He’s no good for you - take it from me, I know these things.”

Alastor watched Vox’s expression curiously as he circled a finger around an HDMI port, gentle and soothing. The Television Demon seemed caught somewhere between shame, guilt, and frustration. He squeezed Alastor’s knee again.

“It isn’t all bad,” Vox said quietly, unable to meet either of their gazes. “There’s a reason I’ve stayed with him.”

For some reason, that stung Alastor more than he expected it to, and he withdrew his hand from the back of Vox’s head. Vox glanced at him, wounded, and slowly recoiled his own hand from Alastor’s knee.

“It almost sounds as though you’re thinking of going back to him,” Alastor said with a tight smile.

“He knows me,” Vox said defensively. “He knows my secrets and I know his and we’ve learned what each other likes and doesn’t. It isn’t always bad. We fight but in the end... we work together. We’re business partners. We have to figure it out.”

Alastor had to stop himself from digging gashes into Rosie’s lovely polished oak table. It had only been *two days* since their fight with Valentino.

“After everything he said to you, everything he said to both of us... you’re still going back to him?”

Vox scowled, wrapping his arms around himself. “He loves me. He was just... surprised to see you. He’s hurting too, Alastor. He’s been through a lot.”

Alastor bared his teeth viciously. “Why are you defending him?”

“Because when you left, he stayed!” Vox snapped and Alastor straightened, falling silent.

“We fight all the time,” Vox said. “We say hurtful shit to each other all the time, but the thing is he never actually leaves. We always work things out in the end, even if it takes days.” He rubbed an arm, lowering his gaze as a frown pinched his brows. “He shouldn’t have said what he did, but maybe we shouldn’t have attacked him.”

Alastor’s hands curled into fists. “Vox, what he said to you-”

“Is nothing I don’t already know!” Vox snapped. “He’s right! I am a fucking freak! But at least he *tries*. I’ve been with him far longer than I was even friends with you, Alastor, so don’t pretend you know what’s best for me! Don’t pretend to know anything about my relationship with him! Don’t pretend you suddenly fucking care!”

“I do care!” Alastor snarled, temper boiling over.

“Then why the fuck didn’t you come save me from him?”

Alastor’s eyes widened in unison with Vox’s before Vox quickly dropped his head into his hands.

“I didn’t mean that,” he muttered. “That’s not... He doesn’t do anything I don’t ask him to. He’s not...” Vox groaned softly and rubbed his hands down his screen. He lifted his head with a frown and straightened. “I can handle him. He’ll sulk for a few days but a gift usually softens him.”

Alastor vaguely noticed his own palms were bleeding and he unclenched his fists. “You’re *afraid* of him.”

Vox bristled. "I'm not afraid, you pretentious ass! I'm just exhausted with the arguing. Is five minutes of peace too much to ask for?"

"You're afraid of what he'll do if you don't go back to him," Alastor growled and Vox tensed before springing to his feet with a strained smile.

"Well, this has been *wonderful*. Great to see you again, Rosie. Alastor, as always, you're a fucking *pleasure* to be around." He whirled on his heel and marched towards the door.

"Vox, sit down," Rosie said harshly. "Alastor, bite that tongue of yours before *I* do it for you."

Vox lingered by the door, back straight as Alastor narrowed his eyes at Rosie. She matched his glare.

"If you had heard what that vile *thing* said-" Alastor began but he was quickly interrupted by Rosie.

"I don't need to know what he said. Alastor, look at Vox. Really look at him."

Alastor slowly turned to face Vox. There were thick ropes of tension in his shoulders and his nails bit into his palms. Tiny sparks bounced off his frame here and there, and he refused to look at either of them, keeping his screen aimed at the door. He was furious - furious at Alastor, as usual.

"He's angry at me. *Again*."

"He's *upset*," Rosie murmured. "He needs support, not judgement." Her gaze hardened. "Something you haven't given him for fifty years."

Alastor whipped around to face her, mouth falling open in protest before she subtly nodded to Vox and he glanced over at the Television Demon again to see him... trembling.

Vox lowered his head a fraction and the bitterness faded from Alastor's eyes. His chest ached.

"...I'm sorry, Vox. Please take a seat."

"Fuck you," Vox ground out, voice breaking. "I don't need your pity." He whirled on Alastor and Rosie. "I'm not a child! I don't need coddling! I'm an Overlord! I can handle Val's shitty temper and his tantrums and I don't need the support of a smug, know-it-all bastard and a matchmaker who isn't being *at all* subtle about any of this!" He glared at Rosie. "Just stop. I know what you're trying to do."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh? And what's that?"

"You're trying to crush me and Alastor together like Barbie dolls because you think it's '*what's good for us*', but we aren't the people we used to be! We aren't so naive. We don't *fit* together anymore. We don't... We're not even *friends*." Vox shook his head angrily. "And it doesn't matter anyway because I'm happy with Val."

Alastor's ears flattened to his skull and his lips retracted into a snarl. "No, you're not," he said before he could stop himself and he was surprised to find jealousy simmering in his stomach. Jealousy and rage.

Vox shot him a heated glare. "I'm *happy*."

Alastor stood with a vicious smile. "He treats you like a *prop*. An object. He speaks to you as though you're less than a person."

"Because I'm a fucking *machine*!" Vox roared, screen glitching and voice cracking.

Rosie's breath hitched softly and Alastor bristled as Vox's body crackled with electricity.

"My nervous system is made up of wires, my eyes are just for show - I see through cameras in my screen, I can shut my damn lungs off and switch to a mechanical system... I'm *not* a person." Vox glowered at Alastor. "And Val... understands. He accepts me when no one else does."

"He treats you like *shit*," Alastor snarled and Vox tensed.

"Alastor," Rosie said sharply and he spared her a glance and caught her thick scowl. Alastor's ears remained pinned.

"He deserves better," Alastor snapped in frustration before he ran a hand through his hair. "You didn't- Valentino has-" He cut himself off with a click of his tongue before whirling angrily on Vox and jabbing a finger into his chest. He wondered when they had moved so close to one another.

"You are more than a machine. You are intelligent and stubborn and determined and *insufferable* and-" He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. "And who cares if you're made of wires and cameras? Who cares if you can switch your lungs off? What does it *matter*? Vox, you are so damn incredible and I don't understand why you let Valentino belittle-"

Alastor clamped his mouth shut so hard that his jaw clicked.

Vox's digital eyes were twice their usual size.

Rosie bit back a laugh.

Alastor closed his eyes in defeat and sighed. "Fine. You're happy with him. You're going back to him. I won't stop you."

Vox stared at him for a long moment and Alastor settled into his chair once more with a frustrated frown. "I'll still be here, regardless of what you choose." His frown eased a fraction. "I'll stay for as long as you want me to."

Rosie smiled gently at him and he couldn't quite hold her gaze.

Finally, Vox sat down. "Thank you, Alastor," he murmured.

Alastor lifted his gaze to Vox's tentative smile and his heart ached. He stifled a sigh and turned his attention back to Rosie.

"We've decided to fight back," he said. "It appears we're both tired of following her orders."

Rosie's gentle smile faltered. She looked concerned. "I see..."

"We know where this leads," Vox said and she turned her worried gaze to him. "But it's going to lead there eventually anyway, so might as well enjoy what time we have left here." He took Alastor's hand and rubbed his thumb over his knuckles and Alastor looked down in surprise before squeezing Vox's fingers affectionately.

Rosie glanced between them both before pursing her lips. "Have you considered asking the princess for help? Or maybe Lucifer himself?" She flicked her gaze to Alastor. "That's what she wants anyway, isn't it? She asked you to bring the princess to her. Maybe Charlie can help."

"If Charlie gets involved, she will almost certainly want to meet The Root and have a *friendly chat* with her about releasing us." He smiled tightly. "The Root will *destroy* her. I won't allow Charlie to go to Purgatory - she'll never return."

Rosie's gaze warmed. "You care for that girl."

Alastor pressed his lips together with a frown and beside him Vox smiled and traced his fingers over Alastor's palm.

"Can't have my deal going to waste," Alastor said with a dismissive wave and he knew neither of them believed him when their smiles widened.

"Then speak to Lucifer," Rosie suggested. "He won't be nearly as naive as his daughter."

"If Roo takes us, she'd be doing the king a favour," Vox muttered and Alastor tipped his head a little in amusement. *Roo?*

"He doesn't exactly trust us," Alastor agreed.

Rosie huffed a laugh. "That's because neither of you are trustworthy. How many souls do you own between you?"

She had a point.

She chuckled to herself and shook her head. "You don't need him to trust you. You just need him to see that you're the better option over Roo."

"Short of facing her, I don't see how he could help us. Last time it took all the Archangels to lock her away - they couldn't even destroy her," Vox said with a frown. "What can Lucifer possibly do alone? He can't even break our chains."

Rosie shrugged. "You'll never know what he can do if you don't ask him."

Alastor grazed his fingers over Vox's pulse point and was surprised when the Television Demon immediately leaned towards him. Vox was so sensitive to touch and any sort of affection...

He deserved better than Valentino.

Rosie smiled knowingly at them both. “It’s good to see you boys working together again.”

Vox slotted their fingers together and it occurred to Alastor that he was seeking reassurance. He knocked his knee against Vox’s and the Television Demon immediately pressed his knee against Alastor’s. Alastor began to wonder if Vox was aware of his own neediness. Either way, Alastor was happy to indulge him.

Conversation turned to lighter topics and throughout the afternoon, Alastor found himself stealing glances at Vox, noting his subtle reactions every time Alastor squeezed his hand or rubbed his knuckles. When Vox’s nerves got the better of him, his leg would bounce restlessly, but Alastor would bump their knees together and Vox would still. When Vox was frustrated, the fingers of his other hand would drum against his thigh, but Alastor would rub circles into Vox’s wrist and he would go limp. When Vox’s antennae sparked with excitement, Alastor would lift a hand to the ports at the back of his head and a ripple of electricity would flow through Vox’s entire body.

The Television Demon was endlessly fascinating and eventually, Alastor fell quiet in favour of studying Vox as he and Rosie chatted. Vox didn’t seem to notice.

Finally, Vox excused himself to the bathroom and as he stood up, Alastor’s hand trailed down his back and Vox’s eyes slid shut as he arched into Alastor’s palm. He showed no recognition of his own behaviour and he wandered off to the bathroom with a jaunty whistle. Alastor watched him go with an amused smile.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen that expression,” Rosie said softly and Alastor turned to her curiously.

“Care to elaborate, darling?”

Rosie smiled fondly at him. “Here’s me thinking you two were going to have to work hard to rebuild the bond between you, but you’re just as infatuated with him as you were all those decades ago.”

Alastor raised his eyebrows. “I’m what now?”

Rosie giggled, covering her mouth daintily with one hand. “Oh, Alastor! Don’t be so coy! You can barely hug me, but you haven’t stopped touching him all afternoon. And the way you look at him, the way you study him, the way you relax around him even after an argument... well, even a blind man could see it.”

Alastor straightened and frowned. “See what?”

Rosie chuckled. “Deny it all you want; I’m not buying it! I’ll say it again: you two are *good* for each other.”

Alastor’s mouth drew into a thin line. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about. As Vox has stated *many times* today; he’s quite *happy* with Valentino.”

“And that pisses you off, doesn’t it?”

“Rosie!”

Rosie laughed and waved a hand. “See? You’re jealous!”

“I am *not*. ”

“You are,” Rosie teased before her gaze softened into something sad and sympathetic. “But you can’t push him. We both know that moth can’t give him what you can, but Vox has to come to that conclusion himself. These sorts of things can’t be rushed - especially after everything you two have faced.”

Alastor's ears flattened in annoyance. "Rosie, dear, I have absolutely *no idea* what it is you think I want from Vox, but I can assure you-"

"Yeah, yeah, you're an ace in the hole, I've got it," Rosie dismissed with a click of her tongue and a sip of tea. "But if, perchance, you *did* want something more with Vox-"

"Which I don't."

"-then you need to support his decisions and be there for him when he needs you. He feels abandoned. You need to show him that you'll stick with him this time, even if he doesn't choose *you*."

Alastor fell silent, pain blossoming in his chest. He shook his head slowly. "I can't stand idly by and watch Valentino abuse him. You heard him earlier; he wants to be *saved*."

Rosie frowned. "If you attack Valentino, you're taking Vox's choice away. *Again*. His head and his heart are a total mess. Both you and Valentino have hurt him and he's hurt both of you - you have to let him figure out what he wants." She fixed him with a stern look. "You have to figure out what you want too."

"I *want* Vox," Alastor said in exasperation before his eyes widened and Rosie smirked slyly at him. "...I mean, I want things to go back to how they used to be between us. I want us to be friends again. I want Vox to stop being abused by that vile moth. I want-"

There were footsteps approaching them and Alastor clamped his mouth shut as Vox joined them.

"Those cinnamon sticks are-" Vox cut himself off at the tension in Alastor's frame and when he took his seat, his fingers brushed a flattened ear. Alastor found himself relaxing, head tipping into Vox's touch.

“You okay?” Vox whispered, still petting Alastor’s ear and they shared a look before Vox flicked his gaze to Rosie in query. “Everything alright?”

“Peachy!” Rosie chirped before she grinned innocently. “We were just talking about you.”

Alastor sent her a narrow glare and her grin widened.

Vox massaged the base of Alastor’s ear. “Oh?” he asked, as nonchalantly as possible.

“Ignore her,” Alastor grumbled even as he attempted to press his head further into Vox’s hand like a particularly affectionate cat. “She has an odd sense of humour.”

Vox’s fingers were very talented.

“Hm,” Vox said as his hand slid from Alastor’s ear through his hair, before falling onto the back of his chair, arm curled almost protectively around Alastor.

Alastor leaned back against the chair, blinking slowly, smugly. He distantly wished that Valentino was watching and the thought had him resting his hand on Vox’s knee. He could feel Vox’s gaze on him, studying him and he turned slowly to meet his screen, smirk in place as he squeezed Vox’s knee pointedly, *possessively*. Vox stared at him for a moment before carefully curling his fingers around Alastor’s shoulder, equally as possessive.

Rosie cleared her throat.

They withdrew quickly from one another and Rosie shot Alastor a reproachful look. He averted his gaze grumpily.

Conversation flowed for half an hour or so before Vox and Alastor stood and bid Rosie a good evening.

And when Vox automatically settled a possessive hand at Alastor's lower back, Alastor pretended that he hadn't seen Rosie's pointed look and he trailed a finger down Vox's antenna in encouragement.

"Green," he whispered as they left the emporium and he sent a burst of static through the undamaged antenna, making Vox's fingers spread over his back.

Fuck Valentino.

Vox was *his*.

Vox scowled at the box of chocolates in his hand, knuckles poised at the door. Eventually, he convinced himself to knock and the door soon swung open to reveal Valentino's scowling face.

He crossed his arms and Vox pursed his lips before offering the chocolates. "I'm sorry for attacking you."

Valentino bared his teeth before his shoulders slumped and he sighed. "I'm sorry for what I said."

Vox raised his eyebrows and they stared at each other for a moment before Valentino stepped aside and gestured for Vox to join him. Vox closed the door behind him.

"I shouldn't have called you a 'freak'," Valentino murmured. "I was... surprised to see Alastor here. I got jealous. Took it out on you."

Vox blinked and the fight drained from him. “I shouldn’t have called you a ‘rapist’. I shouldn’t have shocked you.”

Valentino collapsed onto the couch and reached for Vox. “Come here, amorcito. I’ve missed you these past few days. Where have you been?”

Vox allowed himself to be pulled into Valentino’s lap. “Mostly at bars. Drinking. Got shitfaced and someone offered to put me up for a couple of nights if I sucked their cock.” The lie rolled easily off Vox’s tongue, as they often did around Valentino these days.

Valentino snorted and rubbed his back. “Did he at least suck yours?”

“He did,” Vox lied again before sliding his arms around Valentino’s neck. “Wasn’t as good as when you do it.”

There was a formula to win Valentino over - Vox had learned it years ago; gift, compliment, physical affection, flirt. It was almost instinctive to him now.

Valentino smirked and kissed him sweetly on the top of his head and for a moment, Vox let his imagination conjure up an image of Alastor. He frowned at himself in surprise and turned his attention back to Valentino.

Weird.

Valentino plucked the box of chocolates from Vox’s grip and tossed them carelessly over the couch. The box burst open and chocolates spilled over the floor. Vox scowled, even as Valentino began peppering kisses over his neck.

He put a hand on Valentino’s chest. “No more dosing actors with your saliva,” Vox said firmly and Valentino scowled in confusion.

“Excuse me?”

Vox leaned back to frown at him, stiffening when Valentino smacked his ass. He grabbed Valentino’s arms. “No more forcing your actors to do things they don’t want to do by doping them up with your saliva. I won’t air that shit anymore. If you want to film a particular scene, find *willing* actors.”

Valentino squeezed his ass, mouth a thin line. “Since when do you give a shit about my actors?”

“Since I don’t want to air actual rape scenes on my channels,” Vox said harshly and Valentino bristled before suddenly grabbing Vox’s shirt and throwing him flat against the couch. He straddled Vox with a soft growl and Vox glowered at him, pressing a hand against his chest once more.

“It isn’t *rape*. Those sinners know what they signed up for,” Valentino said.

“If you have to drug them to make them do a scene, you can’t call it *consent*.”

“Where is all this coming from?”

Vox shoved Valentino backwards and he sat upright. “Does it matter? Just cut it out. You’ve got plenty of actors. Choose the ones who want to do those scenes.”

“The fans have expectations. They have favourites. Sinners like Angel are in demand - we turn a higher profit if he performs in more scenes. Unfortunately, that means there’ll be some scenes that he needs a little *encouragement*-”

“Cut it out or I’ll stop airing your shit.”

Valentino clamped his mouth shut and blinked at Vox. His expression quickly soured and he shoved Vox against the couch again, pinning his arms. “Our contract states you can’t do that.”

“Fuck the contract,” growled Vox. “I won’t air rape scenes.”

Valentino narrowed his eyes. “...This is about Alastor, isn’t it?”

Vox lifted his head. “It’s about not being a scumbag.”

Long fingers wrapped around Vox’s neck. “He’s putting ideas in your head. Manipulating you. Sabotaging your business.”

Vox rolled his eyes. “This isn’t about him. This is about us. We’re *Overlords*, Val. We have a duty to the souls we own. We’re supposed to protect them.” Valentino’s fingers tightened around his throat and Vox swallowed uncomfortably.

“They were stupid enough to give up their souls for a chance at fame or pleasure or an everlasting high,” growled Valentino. “They don’t deserve protection. They are ours to do with as we please, providing we fulfil whatever dirty desires they have.”

Vox licked his lips and managed to ease his wrist free of Valentino’s grip. He touched the moth-demon’s cheek tenderly. “What happened to the gentle, empathetic man I used to love?”

Valentino stilled, eyes blowing wide and Vox thumbed over his lips, a memory of him doing the same to Alastor not too long ago appearing in his mind.

“You’ve become everything you once hated,” Vox whispered sadly and Valentino stiffened before suddenly gripping Vox’s undamaged antenna and yanking it sharply until it snapped off.

Vox yelped and Valentino hurled the antenna across the room with a snarl. “Fuck you!” he hissed. “You turned me into this!”

He kissed Vox, ramming his tongue into his mouth and Vox struggled beneath him but soon stilled when Valentino’s hand tightened around his throat. His thoughts grew thick like tar as Valentino’s saliva dripped onto his tongue, and lust invaded his mind.

He frowned as Valentino began tearing at his clothes.

“Stop,” Vox muttered.

Valentino pulled back and bared his teeth viciously. “You’ve never loved me. You’ve only ever had eyes for him - even after he abandoned you, even after he broke you... Nothing I do will ever be good enough.”

He unbuttoned his trousers and Vox tried to wriggle free. “Val, stop.”

“You’re still letting him manipulate you,” Valentino spat but his eyes were glazed with tears. “After everything he’s done to you... You’re still obsessed with him. Still *infatuated* with him.”

Vox shook his head in frustration and grabbed Valentino’s wrists. “I’m not. Val, calm down. Let’s talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Valentino snapped and he manhandled Vox onto his hands and knees and grabbed his hard cock. Vox grimaced, humiliation at his own venom-induced arousal causing him to lower his head.

“Like you said; I’m a useless *whore*,” Valentino growled. “So why not do the only thing I’m good at?” His voice cracked and Vox winced.

“Val-”

“Shut the fuck up,” Valentino snarled as he forced into Vox dry and Vox whimpered in pain.

“Val, please, stop. Can we just talk about this?”

Valentino gripped the back of his screen and shoved his face into the arm of the couch. He hit Vox’s ass again. “Freak.”

Vox tensed. “Val, please don’t,” he whispered.

Another bruising smack. “Pervert.”

Vox swallowed. “I don’t want-”

A harder strike. “Worthless.”

Vox’s screen reddened. “I don’t want this,” he whispered in a small voice.

“What you want doesn’t matter, you disgusting little *drone*,” Valentino growled and he touched a familiar button at Vox’s hip, watching navy skin grow transparent. He made a noise of disdain. “What an ugly fucking mess.”

Vox fell silent, then hissed when Valentino gripped his damaged antenna and yanked his head backwards.

“Say it,” Valentino whispered beside his screen and he jerked his hips sharply and squeezed Vox’s cock far too tight. “Say how fucking vile you are.”

Vox licked his lips and clamped his mouth shut and Valentino growled and wrapped a spare hand around his throat.

“No one will ever want you, Vox. You’re worthless. Pathetic. Repulsive. You’re *weak*. Everyone laughs at you behind your back. Everyone mocks you. No one respects you. Everyone you care about abandons you because they can’t stand the sight of you. Your body is nauseating. I feel sick whenever I look at you. You’re *mutilated*. Deformed.”

He lifted Vox by his neck, until his back was arched at a painful angle and every thrust made his spine ache. Vox’s hands shot to the arm of the couch in an effort to support himself.

“You’re more metal than person,” Valentino breathed beside his screen and he smacked Vox’s ass again. “A robot. Nothing more than a rusty, outdated *machine*. ” He squeezed Vox’s cock painfully tight. “The *only* reason I touch you is because you’re fucking *mine*. ”

He bit down on Vox’s shoulder and Vox whined.

“Say it,” Valentino hissed. “Say you’re mine.”

Vox licked his lips, eyes squeezed shut. “I’m yours.”

“Again.” *Smack*.

“I’m yours, Val.”

“Say how fucking disgusting you are.”

Vox trembled and remained quiet.

Smack. “Say it.”

There was a dark bruise forming on Vox’s ass and he gritted his teeth. “Red.”

“Fuck that,” Valentino whispered. “You don’t get away that easily.” He pulled out of Vox and Vox barely had time to sigh with relief before Valentino rolled him onto his back and shoved into him again with a snarl, hand closing around Vox’s throat once more.

“Say it,” Valentino hissed. “Look me in the eye and tell me how pathetic you are.”

Vox swallowed and shook his head. “Red,” he whimpered.

Valentino growled and spat on his screen. “Useless piece of shit. You’re not even a good fuck. No wonder no one sticks around. People can’t wait to get rid of you. Your parents should have *drowned* you at birth.”

“Red,” Vox said louder as he trembled. “Please, stop. I don’t- I can’t-”

“Shut up,” Valentino snapped and he pulled out of Vox and suddenly dragged him further down the couch. “You’re so fucking pathetic! Open your mouth. You must be useful at *something*.”

Vox opened his mouth obediently and Valentino wasted no time in filling it. He gripped Vox’s damaged antenna, bending it painfully. “Look at me.”

Vox opened his eyes, tears streaming down his screen.

Valentino curled his lips in disgust. “Some fucking Overlord you are. Weak, whiny, paranoid, *desperate*... Imagine if Alastor could see you now - imagine if he could see how hard you

are. What would he say? He'd be nauseated. He'd think you perverted. He'd abandon you all over again." Valentino narrowed his eyes. "Touch yourself."

Vox curled his fingers into his palms as he trembled.

"Red," he tried to say around Valentino's dick, but the word was muffled.

Valentino growled in frustration and pulled out of Vox's mouth before finishing himself off and coming on Vox's screen.

Vox let out a sob then tensed as Valentino grabbed his hard dick and began jerking it mercilessly.

"Stop," he begged and Valentino threw him a disdainful look.

"I'm just a whore - it's my job to make you come."

Vox found the strength to kick him in the face and Valentino crashed against the couch with a pained groan. Vox tumbled off the couch with another sob and staggered to his feet before escaping into the lights.

Vox fell to his knees in Alastor's room, arms wrapped around his naked body as he wept.

Alastor leapt off the bed and raced towards him, frame already stretching into something monstrous and bloodthirsty.

"Who?" Alastor snarled as he reached for Vox.

“Red,” Vox whimpered as he flinched away from Alastor’s hand. “Red. Red. Red,” he whispered like a mantra, trembling.

Alastor froze, chest heaving with fury. “Who did this?” Vox’s screen was lowered and he couldn’t see his face, but he could see the Television demon’s *organs*.

Which was... unexpected.

Vox shook his head, holding himself tighter. “Red,” he said again.

Alastor’s ears flattened and he forced himself into his usual form as he slipped off his coat and carefully draped it around Vox.

Vox stilled but he refused to raise his head and his static popped erratically around them. Alastor kneeled in front of him, trying to mask his discomfort when he caught sight of Vox’s hard cock.

“Vox, my dear, what happened?”

His antenna had been snapped and the other had been bent at a strange angle. There was a bruise around his throat. Alastor ground his teeth together in rage.

Vox lowered his head further, hunching in on himself. “Why did I come here?” he whispered to himself. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

“Vox?”

Vox’s fans kicked into overdrive and electricity raced over his frame. “Fuck! Why did I come here?” he asked hysterically as he pressed his screen into his hands. He suddenly looked

down at his own naked frame. “Fuck!” he said loudly before wrapping Alastor’s coat tighter around himself. More sparks skittered across his frame in his growing panic. “No, no, no-” He flinched and put a hand to his head and Alastor’s breath hitched at the smoke rising from his vents.

“Vox-”

“Why did I come here?” Vox whimpered. “Now you know.”

The smoke grew darker. “Vox-”

“You fucking *know*. You’ve seen. You’ll think I’m a freak and- and-”

He could *see* components starting to melt in Vox’s body. Could see electronics shutting down and his organs having to work twice as hard - his lungs, his heart... even his blood vessels began to dilate, attempting to cool him down. It would have been beautiful to watch had Vox not been at risk of *dying*.

“Vox!”

“Valentino’s *right*. You’re going to abandon me again-”

Electricity raced through the cables that made up Vox’s nervous system, lighting his entire body up in a magnificent sapphire. Components popped and exploded inside him in small bursts of white light and wires glowed red, in danger of setting alight.

Alastor grabbed the edges of Vox’s screen, forcing him to look up. “I’m not going anywhere, my dear,” Alastor whispered urgently. “I’m right here.”

Vox blinked at him, gaze filled with fear.

What was the white liquid dripping down his-

Alastor quickly put two and two together and had to fight the urge to stretch into a more demonic form and *march over to V-Tower and rip that vile moth-demon's limbs off one by one and-*

“Breathe,” Alastor whispered as he smoothed his fingers down the edge of Vox’s screen. “You’re safe.”

Vox swallowed, rubbing his own arms as smoke curled out of his vents. “You’re going to leave.”

Alastor shook his head. “I’m not going anywhere, Podcast.” He pulled a face at the liquid rolling down Vox’s screen and he shrugged his waistcoat off and carefully cleaned the mess.

Vox trembled. “You think I’m filthy. Perverse.”

Alastor thumbed his tears away. “No.”

“You think I’m disgusting.”

Alastor caught the bottom of his screen between a finger and thumb. “I think you’re beautiful, my dear.”

Vox flinched and another component burst into flames. “You’re lying. I’m a monster. More machine than man. Deformed. Nauseating.”

Alastor licked his lips and pushed through his own discomfort as he traced a barely visible silver circuit track that rolled down Vox’s shoulder and towards his heart. He watched Vox’s

heart beat a fraction quicker and he raised his eyebrows before spreading his fingers and watching Vox's lungs expand in a soft gasp.

Fascinating.

He met Vox's grief-stricken gaze and he pressed his palm flat over Vox's heart.

"You are *perfect*," Alastor breathed, and he meant it.

Because this Vox looked nothing like the Vox from Purgatory. The Vox from Purgatory had a human body with navy skin, but *this* Vox... the real Vox... his body was an incredible combination of electronics and tissue, of electricity and blood. Everything Alastor had faced at the hands of Purgatory Vox, everything he had *done* to Purgatory Vox... none of it could be real because *Vox didn't actually look like that*.

Alastor huffed a relieved laugh and the timing was terrible and Vox looked extremely confused, but he tipped his head slightly and studied Alastor's pleased smile and he blinked in surprise.

"You're... laughing," Vox said slowly, uncertainly, and Alastor's smile widened and he cupped Vox's screen between both hands and leaned their heads together.

"Because you are, quite simply, the most gorgeous man I have ever laid eyes upon."

Vox reared backwards, staring at Alastor in a mixture of alarm and confusion.

Alastor laughed again, rather hysterically, before testing whether he still had access to some old, familiar magic that he hadn't used for quite some time. He was delighted to find that his powers remained unrestricted and he touched Vox's antenna stump and watched a new one form. Next, he touched the twisted, crimped antenna and bent it back into place.

Emerald sigils flashed about them and Alastor leaned their foreheads together once more as his hand smoothed down the back of Vox's screen and over his neck, healing the bruise around his throat. His fingers brushed over Vox's shoulder, down to his chest and they hovered there, healing magic sinking into Vox's body and repairing melted components and damaged wires and singed organs.

Vox's breath hitched and Alastor watched the movement of his lungs in real-time, mesmerised. Alastor's magic travelled through Vox's nervous system in a clash of green and blue and Alastor had never seen anything like it. Vox was truly wonderful.

Curious, he sent a burst of static through one of Vox's antennae and a blue light coursed through the cables of his nervous system before reaching his skin, and Alastor gasped as every silver circuit trace painted over Vox's skin suddenly lit up like an explosion of fireworks.

"Vox," Alastor whispered in awe and Vox stared at Alastor for a long moment.

Alastor repeated the packet of static, entranced by the light show. "Why were you so afraid of showing me all of *this*?"

Vox lifted a hand to Alastor's neck and kissed him.

Alastor jerked backwards with wide eyes and flat ears. "No."

Vox froze and Alastor could see his heart starting to race and the panicked charge beginning to flow through his body, at risk of undoing all of Alastor's healing.

"I'm sorry," Vox whispered, horrified. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I did that. I'm *sorry*-"

"Breathe," Alastor said softly and he held the hand that Vox wasn't using to cover himself with. "It's okay, Vox." He struggled to wrangle his own fear under control. Vox was *naked*

and he had kissed Alastor and Vox was *powerful* - he could so easily push Alastor to the ground and-

He shook his head. Vox was the one that needed comfort. He could deal with his own anxiety later.

“A long time ago,” Alastor whispered as he rubbed Vox’s knuckles, “you told me that we search for comfort in strange ways when we feel broken enough.” He smiled weakly at Vox.

Vox swallowed and trembled and suddenly threw his arms around Alastor’s neck and sobbed into his chest.

At first, Alastor stiffened, but he forced himself to relax. Vox needed him. He rubbed Vox’s back slowly, smoothing over the ports beside his spine. “It’s alright, my dear. You’re safe.”

Vox’s fingers curled into the back of his shirt and Alastor found himself splaying a protective hand over the back of Vox’s screen.

Vox cried and cried and Alastor held him closer, rubbed his back slower, and pulsed soothing static into him as he lowered his frequency into a calming hum. After a while, he began to murmur comforting words against the top of his screen. Words like *perfect* and *mesmerising* and *fascinating* and *safe*.

When Vox sobbed himself hoarse, Alastor held him tight and stroked his antennae and rested his chin atop his screen.

“How do you feel?” Alastor asked quietly.

“Exhausted,” came the crackly reply.

“Stay,” Alastor said.

Vox swallowed. "I don't deserve to."

Alastor growled softly. "You deserve the world, my dear."

Vox was quiet for a few seconds. "You keep calling me that."

"Would you like me to stop?"

"No. It's nice."

Alastor closed his eyes and squeezed Vox gently. "I want you to stay, my dear. Please stay."

"...You don't think I'm a disgusting freak?" The voice was soft and vulnerable.

"I think you're incredible." He traced a thin scar at Vox's shoulder.

"...You don't think I'm perverted? Worthless?"

"I think you're wonderful. Priceless. *Beautiful.*" They were alone. Alastor could say whatever he liked when it was just the two of them. Vox deserved the praise. Vox deserved *everything*.

"...I'm sorry. I crossed a line."

"It's alright."

“It isn’t.”

Alastor huffed a sigh and toyed with a port at Vox’s back. Vox leaned into his touch.

“You stopped when I asked you to,” Alastor whispered. “That’s all that matters.” He closed his eyes, exploring each port. No one ever stopped when he asked them to. Only Vox. Vox was... Vox was special. Perfect in every way that mattered.

“Alastor?”

“Hm?”

Vox hesitated. “...Thank you. For not running away.”

Alastor frowned unhappily before grazing his lips over the top of Vox’s screen. Vox released a shaky breath and clutched at him.

“Never again, my dear. Never again.”

Chapter End Notes

Warning (updated): The middle section was originally marked as very dubious consent, but a few commenters have suggested this should be upgraded to rape. Val ignores the traffic light system.

Before y'all ask, yes, Alastor will absolutely indulge Vox in some body worship... later ;)

...And you all said you felt sorry for Val ;) Ha!

Chapter 42: Relighting The Fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Vox awoke slowly from the most comfortable sleep he'd had in *years*.

His cameras flicked online as his digital eyes slid open and he stretched his back out, popping knots out of his spine as a contented sigh fluttered from his lips.

Alastor smiled fondly at him from the other pillow, clearly having studied him as he was sleeping. Still, Vox found his own lips twitching into a smile.

“Morning,” he whispered.

Alastor blinked slowly at him, like a cat that had everything it wanted in life. “Good morning.” He reached out and brushed his fingers along the edge of Vox’s screen. “Sleep well?”

“Like the dead,” Vox teased, earning himself what was most definitely a pity laugh.

Alastor watched him through half-lidded eyes and it struck Vox how soft and vulnerable he looked in his pyjamas.

Damn, he was gorgeous.

Alastor toyed with his crimped antenna and Vox huffed in amusement. “You have an obsession.”

“I like them,” Alastor replied easily as he stroked the thin pole. “I always have. I like a lot about you, Vox.”

Vox’s screen tinted red before he carefully sat up and let the covers fall away from his body. He was covered by a pair of Alastor’s red silk boxers - which he decided he quite liked and would definitely be asking Alastor where he purchased them from - but other than that, he hadn’t had the energy to think about more clothing last night before passing out. He hadn’t even bothered to return his skin to its natural opaque state.

As his torso was revealed, his heart raced and he swallowed nervously when Alastor’s gaze dropped to his chest. He opened his mouth then clamped it shut again, words drying up on his tongue as a lump formed in his throat.

Alastor watched him, still smiling softly. “Want to talk about it?”

Vox wrapped his arms around himself. “...I’m not sure.”

Humming quietly, Alastor propped himself up on one elbow and carefully unwound Vox’s arms from his body. Vox stared at him in surprise and Alastor smirked lazily. “Stop hiding. I want to see you.”

Vox’s eyes widened and Alastor’s smirk grew. “Was it something I said?” he purred.

“...You... You want to *see* me?” Vox whispered. “Like *this*?” He swallowed. “It doesn’t make you... uncomfortable?”

“What about the phrase ‘*I like a lot about you*’ confuses you?” Alastor drawled as he touched Vox’s chest, right over his heart, and pulsed a playful burst of static into him. The barely visible silver tracks on Vox’s skin brightened with gentle blue light, rippling outwards from the area that Alastor had touched.

Vox’s breath hitched as he watched the admittedly pretty light fade.

“And here I thought your face was expressive,” said Alastor as he traced one of the tracks with a finger, watching how the blue light followed him, altering its intensity depending on the pressure he applied.

He traced a couple more tracks before suddenly grazing a finger over one of Vox’s vents and a laugh erupted from the Television Demon. Alastor grinned with delight.

“Ticklish?”

Vox pursed his lips, trying to look annoyed and failing miserably. “Don’t you dare.”

Immediately, Alastor stroked his vents again and Vox giggled before catching Alastor’s wrist. “You’re such an asshole.”

Alastor’s ears shifted in the way they often did when he was relaxed. “You’re enjoying it,” he drawled and Vox hesitated before releasing Alastor’s wrist.

“Maybe.”

Alastor pinged an antenna. “Only *maybe*?”

Vox licked his lips before reaching out to pet a fluffy ear. Alastor leaned into him automatically, eyes fluttering shut and Vox brushed his messy hair from his eyes before resuming his petting.

“You’re the first person who’s ever touched me like this,” Vox whispered and Alastor cracked an eye open. “The first person who’s ever... who doesn’t... who actually *wants*...” Vox shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut as a strange combination of grief and relief and happiness washed over him. “Do you know how fucking long it’s been since someone treated me like a person instead of a damn machine?”

Alastor splayed a hand over his chest and Vox nearly choked. “I have fucking emotions too, damn it!” he hissed angrily, a strange sort of despair threatening to drown him. “I can *feel* fucking everything they do to me! They see wires and capacitors and they *forget*. They fucking magically *forget* that I can feel it. Just because I can turn my pain receptors off, it doesn’t mean I want to! Because it’s all the same damn system; pleasure, pain, hot, cold... Just because I have circuit traces to help me feel things, it doesn’t mean I don’t *enjoy* touch the way everyone else does! Do you know how fucking dehumanising it is to have to turn my entire sense of touch off just because they think they can treat me however the fuck they want? Why do they see electronics and automatically assume I can’t *feel* it? Why do they always start trying to *break* things?”

Vox wrapped his arms around himself again as he sat upright. “And if they’re not trying to break things, they’re throwing up at the side of the fucking bed. Or running away. Or telling me what an ugly, revolting little *freak* I am and *how could anyone ever want you, you hideous, monstrous-*”

Alastor slid a possessive arm around him.

Vox fell silent, staring hard at the sheets, and Alastor gently tugged him down until he fell back against the pillows.

“I think you’re beautiful,” Alastor commented, arm still wrapped firmly around Vox’s middle, and the tension in Vox’s shoulders eased a fraction.

Alastor clicked his tongue in disapproval. “Unfold your arms. I told you that I wanted to see you.”

Vox obediently drew his arms to his sides and Alastor raked his gaze over his chest and stomach with an approving hum. “Better.” And then he just... observed Vox, gaze darting from his heart to his lungs, to every wire and circuit board and mechanical organ before trailing to his liver and spleen and intestines, and his arm remained curled possessively around Vox, hand splayed over his waist.

Anxiety lapped at Vox’s nerves and he drummed his fingers restlessly on the mattress.

Wordlessly, Alastor caught his hand, stilling it, and he continued to study Vox.

Vox turned his head to him. “What?”

“Hush. Let me look at you.”

Vox swallowed and his leg began to bounce beneath the sheets. “What are you looking for?”

Alastor rubbed soothing circles over his knuckles. “I’m watching.”

Vox chewed his lip. “...Watching what?”

“How you work.”

“Oh.” The silence stretched between them and Vox’s leg restarted its bouncing. “I can tell you how I work.”

Alastor sidled closer and used his spare hand to caress Vox’s antennae. “I want to figure it out myself.”

Vox stilled and stared at Alastor for a long moment. “...Why?”

“Because you are the most fascinating person I have ever met and I enjoy studying you.”

Vox was taken off-guard by the sincerity in his tone and he clamped his mouth shut and let Alastor continue. After a few moments, his gaze caught on the tuft of red fur poking out of Alastor’s shirt. He stared at it for an entire minute.

His fingers flexed. "You have fur."

"A little, yes." Alastor rubbed his knuckles slowly.

Vox bit his lip. "...Can I touch it?"

Alastor hesitated and Vox realised he might have pushed too far.

"It's just... I don't have fur and I've always had a thing for sinners with animal characteristics because you guys are so *different* and mammal sinners are always so soft and warm and you make all sorts of sounds when someone pets you in the right spot and- oh, *shit*, Hell has turned me into a damn furry."

Vox's screen burned red and Alastor blinked at him as he buried his face into his hands.

Alastor's arm slid away and Vox whined rather pathetically and reached for him as panic filled his chest - panic at scaring Alastor away - but he froze when he noticed Alastor gingerly undoing the top two buttons of his shirt.

His ears flattened uncertainly as a small ruff of ruby and black fur was revealed over his chest. Below it was the start of the wound Adam had inflicted - it was healing, slowly.

Vox stared at his fur, entranced, and reached for it, but paused at the last moment and raised his gaze to Alastor's frown. "...Colour?"

Again, Alastor hesitated and Vox withdrew his hand. "You're allowed to say *no*, Smiles."

Alastor's hand drifted to his vents and he thumbed over one, lost in thought. Vox stifled a giggle.

“Green,” Alastor said slowly, cautiously and Vox raised an eyebrow before carefully burying his fingers into Alastor’s soft fur.

Alastor swallowed and thumbed Vox’s vent again and this time, a laugh escaped Vox. Alastor startled before his gaze danced with amusement and he repeated the movement.

Vox snickered. “Asshole.”

Alastor grinned and Vox matched the expression as fingers sailed over his vents once more. Vox laughed, trying to defend himself against the onslaught and he clutched at Alastor’s fur and massaged an ear in an effort to distract him. As predicted, Alastor melted into his petting and Vox’s gaze was bright with affection.

“Damn, I love you.”

Their grins faltered and Vox once again covered his screen with his hands. “...Shit.”

Alastor slid away from him and Vox watched wearily as he propped himself up against the headboard, looking torn.

“Al, I didn’t mean that.”

Alastor was quiet for a long moment. “I think you did.” He drew his knees towards his chest, ears low, and Vox sighed and sat beside him, leaning against the headboard as he stared at the far wall.

“It’s probably just...” Vox shook his head, chest aching. “I’m just latching onto you because of what happened yesterday. You’ve been so *kind* to me-”

He cut himself off as Alastor grabbed his hand. They stared at the far wall for a long time, clinging to one another's palms.

"I think," whispered Alastor slowly, "that I want you to mean it."

Vox swallowed thickly, a strange, heavy *something* in his chest. "...Alastor, I... I don't know how I feel. I've enjoyed spending time with you, but I... I can't just *hide* from Val. I've got to face him. I've got to talk to him about what happened."

Alastor turned to him quickly. "Don't go back to him," he whispered.

Vox met his gaze in surprise and Alastor shook his head and placed a hand on his chest. "I can't... I never want to see you like that again, my dear." There was a haunted look behind his gaze and Vox was momentarily paralysed before he frowned.

"I have to talk to him, Smiles. We work together."

A wounded look crossed Alastor's face before he suddenly pressed into Vox's side and slipped his arms tightly around him as he pushed his head under Vox's screen.

"Please don't go back to him," Alastor begged and Vox's breath hitched before he wrapped his arms around Alastor and held him close.

Alastor cared so deeply about him that he was willing to *beg* Vox to stay. Not only that, but he was willing to toss aside his own fear of touch and snuggle into Vox's bare chest to convince him to stay. Had anyone ever cared about Vox like that before?

He petted Alastor's hair and Alastor clutched at his back, fingers curling into the ports at his spine. Vox arched into his touch.

"I've got to face him. I've got to do something about the shit he films."

Alastor shook his head and pressed a long kiss against Vox's chest that had him losing his breath.

"Let me heal you," Alastor whispered shakily as he rubbed Vox's back. "Let me show you how wonderful you are, how incredible you are, how *important* you are to me." He lifted his desperate gaze to meet Vox's. "Don't go back to him, Vox. *Please*. Stay here with me."

Vox held Alastor flush against his chest and stroked his cheek. "Al..."

"I can feel your heart racing, I can *see it*," Alastor whispered as he cupped the back of Vox's screen. "I can feel your frequency in perfect harmony with mine. I can feel your static dancing over my skin. I can hear your fans working faster. I can see your lungs expanding with every hitch of your breath." Alastor pressed their foreheads together, sending a wave of static through Vox's body and lighting up his skin. "You're enjoying this. You *want* this. We can have this if you stay."

Vox's throat grew thick and dry. "I have a company to run and like it or not, Valentino is a part of that company. I *have* to face him."

"I don't want to lose you again."

Vox fell quiet as Alastor squeezed him.

"I've never seen you so... broken," Alastor whispered. "Yesterday, you... I can't let you face that again. Please, just... just *stay*."

Vox studied Alastor's frantic expression and carefully cupped his face, rubbing his thumb over his cheek as he tightened his grip on Alastor. Alastor's fingers slid into the ports at his spine, clinging to him, and not once did he flinch.

“I don’t have to go right this second,” Vox said softly. “I can stay here a little longer.”

He was stunned when Alastor rubbed his cheek into his palm, eyes slipping shut. “You can stay here forever,” he mumbled.

It hit Vox like a brick to the chest.

Alastor loved him.

Alastor *loved* him.

Despite everything they had been through, despite the fighting, despite hurting one another, despite the misunderstandings, despite *all of it*... Alastor loved him.

And perhaps it wasn’t a romantic sort of love but it didn’t matter, because Alastor hadn’t merely said all those wonderful things last night to keep him calm, to comfort him; he had *meant* them. He cared about Vox. He was trying to protect him. When was the last time anyone had cared enough about him to want to protect him?

...He wasn’t worthless. He wasn’t unloveable. All those words that Valentino had carved into his skin in Purgatory might be how Valentino actually saw him, but the words that Purgatory Alastor had carved were *lies*, because the real Alastor *loved him*.

The real Alastor also had *chest fluff*, but that was beside the point.

He was wanted. Alastor wanted him to *stay*. Alastor wanted to touch him and that was more meaningful than anyone else touching him, because Alastor had his own trauma and insecurities and fears, and yet he had pushed them all to the side to take care of Vox.

Vox was practically naked and Alastor was *snuggled into him*. And! Although he had backed off when Vox mistakenly kissed him, he hadn’t *left*. He was still here, begging Vox to stay, to

let Alastor *heal* him.

What an incredible man. Amazing. Fucking *stunning*.

Valentino was wrong. Purgatory was wrong. Vox *mattered*. He mattered to Alastor. Alastor *liked* his body. He liked his antennae and his vents and his circuit-traced skin and his wires. He *wanted* to touch Vox. And despite his trauma, he wanted Vox to play with his ears and hold his hand and stroke his cheek and-

He curled his arm protectively around Alastor's slim waist and caressed his thumb over his cheek until Alastor met his gaze.

"I fucking love you," Vox whispered.

Alastor's ears pricked upright and he blinked, startled.

"I just want you to know," Vox continued quietly but firmly. "I love you. Because after fifty years of pain and heartache and fighting... you still came back to me. You take care of me when I need it most, you make me feel wanted. You even ignore your own fears to make sure I feel secure." He tangled his fingers in Alastor's hair. "And I think *that's* why I came here. When I'm at my lowest, when I'm a wreck and I can't think clearly... I feel *safe* with you."

Alastor swallowed thickly and Vox petted his hair. "I can only hope that one day you'll feel that safe with me."

"I do," Alastor said quickly before his ears flattened briefly in embarrassment, then rose again. "Vox, do you really think I would drape myself around anyone else like this? Especially someone who's wearing nothing but a pair of boxers - they suit you, by the way - and lying in my bed? Do you think I'd be this comfortable around anyone else?"

Vox's heart filled with something warm and weighty and a brilliant smile stretched across his screen as Alastor rested his chin on his chest with a soft huff. Vox stroked his hair and one of

Alastor's hands slid from his back to his side, tracing curiously down his ribs and over his vents and to his waist.

Vox squeezed him affectionately and Alastor's tentative smile widened into something more relaxed. There was movement under his pyjamas that made Vox frown in confusion. Alastor noticed the expression and hesitated, looking conflicted, before he took Vox's hand - the one Vox had wrapped around his waist. Vox's breath hitched as Alastor led his hand beneath his pyjamas.

"Al-"

His fingers brushed something fluffy.

"Is that your tail?" Vox blurted, excitement in his tone, and Alastor chuckled and nodded, allowing Vox to squeeze and pet the appendage.

Vox's other hand shifted from Alastor's hair to his shoulders, holding the Radio Demon close as he explored. "That's adorable," Vox teased. "You're adorable."

The tail wiggled beneath his palm and Vox's eyes widened in awe. Alastor huffed a laugh and traced patterns over Vox's side as he watched Vox's expression cycle through various stages of curiosity, joy, and amusement.

Eventually, Alastor's gaze shifted to Vox's hip and Vox found himself slowly tensing.

Alastor frowned at the subtle change and he glanced up and brushed his fingers along the edge of Vox's screen. "Relax, my dear," he whispered.

Vox thumbed circles between his shoulder blades and squeezed his tail. He was safe. He was wanted. Alastor wouldn't... Alastor wouldn't run like Valentino.

Alastor's fingers trailed to his hip, circling the lights there. "What do they do?"

Vox swallowed and took a moment to compose himself. "Find out for yourself." He had already seen Vox's biggest secret. He wouldn't run. He wouldn't. He wasn't like Valentino. He wasn't like *everyone else*. He wouldn't try to hurt Vox. He wouldn't try to break him.

Alastor frowned again and caressed an antenna and Vox realised he was gripping Alastor's tail extremely tightly. He eased his hold and Alastor rubbed his back comfortingly.

"Breathe," Alastor whispered and Vox matched Alastor's deep, steady breaths. Alastor's fingers trailed from his antenna, down the edge of his screen, over his neck and chest, across his stomach, and to his hip once more. He dropped his gaze and touched a green light and a few smaller green lights sprouted from it. He pressed one at random.

Vox's body was suddenly filled with emerald text, boxes appearing over each of his human organs like a labelled science diagram. The text was composed of vitals like his heart rate and respiration rate and the health status of each organ.

Alastor gazed at his body in fascination, reading the text before touching one of the other smaller green lights. The boxes shifted and the text changed, this time highlighting transparent muscles and any damage.

Alastor cycled slowly through each small light, reading more and more information about Vox's circulatory system and respiratory system and endocrine system and gastrointestinal system. He touched a different coloured light - a blue one - and again, smaller blue lights surrounded it. When he pressed these, they revealed information about Vox's mechanical organs and components and when a few boxes flashed red, indicating component damage, Alastor grazed his fingers above the broken parts and sigils appeared around them as he repaired Vox.

He was gentle and meticulous as he tested each light and Vox began to tremble, overwhelmed by his intense attention.

Alastor pressed a yellow light and cycled through each smaller light and Vox realised he planned on exploring every single button.

“Fuck,” Vox whimpered and Alastor blinked slowly at him as information about his complicated nervous system spilled over his body for Alastor to devour.

“You,” said Alastor lazily, “are far too beautiful for Hell.” He traced the length of one of the major cables that made up Vox’s nervous system. He sent a sharp burst of static into Vox and watched blue charge ripple through every cable of his nervous system. “How magnificent.”

Vox shook and squeezed his eyes shut and Alastor continued his button exploration.

“Now, I’m not one for modern technology,” Alastor drawled as he pressed the button that highlighted Vox’s touch receptors; every faint silver trace over his skin suddenly burning a bright gold. “But I will certainly make an exception for you.” There was a pause as Alastor followed a couple of traces with two fingers. “Simply marvellous.”

He pressed a blue button next and Vox felt his mechanical side slow into dormancy, allowing his organic parts to take over. Alastor said nothing as he pressed the next blue light and his functioning shifted to his mechanical side instead, every organ except his heart becoming useless. Blood vessels constricted, rarely-used circuits fired up and entire portions of his body shut off to protect his human organs and simultaneously allow his electronics to receive proper ventilation.

The rhythm of his breathing changed as his lungs slowed to a stop and a mechanical lung took over, and various tiny fans whirred to life as new electrical pathways were connected.

In the silence of the room, Vox’s body popped and clicked softly and the whole process took less than a minute, but to Vox it felt like a lifetime as Alastor observed him.

Finally, Alastor splayed a hand over his chest. “Look at me and tell me that you’re perfect.”

Vox trembled, eyes firmly shut.

“Look at me and tell me how gorgeous you are, Vox.”

Vox lowered his screen and continued to shake and Alastor toyed with the ports at the back of his head.

“Look at me. I want to hear you tell me how exquisite you are.”

Vox choked out a sob.

Alastor fell quiet and rubbed his back for a couple of minutes until Vox’s trembling subsided. Finally, Vox raised his gaze and Alastor smiled in encouragement.

“Tell me,” he whispered.

Vox’s screen burned red and Alastor chuckled. “Tell me you matter.”

“...I matter.”

“Good,” purred Alastor, stroking Vox’s side in praise. “Tell me you’re handsome.”

Vox’s fans kicked on. “...I’m handsome.”

“Very good,” Alastor said with a smirk. “Now, tell me that you’re worthy of touch. Tell me that you’re worthy of affection and gentleness.”

Vox licked his lips and lowered his gaze but Alastor caught the bottom of his screen and forced him to look up. “You are worthy of this, Vox,” Alastor whispered, frowning lightly. “I want to hear you say it.”

A lump formed in Vox’s throat as he gazed at Alastor. “I don’t deserve you,” he managed hoarsely and Alastor narrowed his eyes.

“You deserve the world, my dear. Now, say it. I want to hear you say that you’re worthy of love.”

Love.

Alastor’s ears lowered a fraction at his own slip and Vox lost his breath for a moment.

Alastor trailed his fingers over the top of Vox’s screen, then down the side as his gaze softened. “You are cherished,” Alastor whispered when Vox couldn’t find any words. “You are wanted. You are valued. You are praiseworthy. You are strong.” He pressed their heads together carefully, sending a pulse of affectionate static between them.

“And I will keep saying it until you believe me,” Alastor breathed.

Vox only realised he was crying when Alastor swiped his tears away with his thumb. He clutched desperately at Alastor.

“I love you,” Vox whimpered. “I love you so damn much. I’ve *missed* you. I’m *sorry*. For everything. I’m sorry for the fights. I’m sorry for pushing you away. I’m sorry for not listening. I’m *sorry*, Alastor. Fuck, I’m sorry.”

His shoulders shook as he sobbed, grief and pain filling his words, and another harrowing sob tore from his throat as Alastor pressed a long kiss to his forehead.

“I’m sorry too,” Alastor whispered and his breaths were a little shaky as he wrapped his arms tightly around Vox. “I’m sorry for not telling you the whole truth, for hiding things, for pushing you away even when I knew it would hurt you. I thought I was protecting you, but I made everything worse. I’m sorry for fighting you. I... I’m sorry I wasn’t there when you needed me, all the times Valentino...” He flinched and squeezed Vox. “The last fifty years should have been different.”

“You’re here now,” Vox breathed as he tangled his fingers into Alastor’s hair. “And you’ve been so fucking good to me. So fucking gentle and sweet and tender and patient and-” He peppered desperate kisses over Alastor’s chest fur as Alastor carefully hooked his chin over the top of Vox’s screen, beside his antennae.

“I love you,” Vox whispered in between kisses. “I love you so fucking much, Smiles.”

Alastor melted against him, their frequencies finding a familiar harmony and Alastor sighed deeply as he stroked the back of Vox’s screen.

“You’ve always had such a large heart, my dear,” Alastor murmured as he nuzzled an antenna and Vox pressed a doting kiss to the tip of the wound Adam had caused. Alastor’s fingers curled into his back.

“You’ve always occupied so much of it,” Vox mumbled.

Alastor stilled then suddenly pushed Vox onto his back and settled on top of him. He tucked his head under Vox’s screen, being careful to keep his antlers away from Vox’s glass, and he snaked his arms around the Television Demon and held him tightly.

Vox threw his arms around Alastor hastily and peppered kisses over a fluffy ear.

“Fuck,” whimpered Alastor, voice cracking and filters flicking off.

“Colour?” Vox breathed against his ear.

“Green,” came the immediate response. “Emerald, lime, olive, juniper, chartreuse.”

Vox snickered. “*Chartreuse*? What kind of traffic light is that?”

Alastor dug his fingers into Vox’s vents.

Vox howled with laughter. “Asshole!” He wrestled with Alastor for a moment, but the Radio Demon was merciless, grin growing wider as he fluttered his fingers over Vox’s vents, using his shadows to pin his wrists above his head. Vox writhed, biting back laughter. “Cheater!”

Alastor hovered above him with a smirk, seemingly unbothered that he was straddling the Television Demon and Vox counted that as a win. They were both healing, slowly.

“I haven’t finished figuring out what all of your buttons do yet,” Alastor drawled and Vox smiled playfully.

“Take your fingers out of my vents and get back to it then.”

“Nonsense!” Alastor chirped. “I can multitask!” He summoned a couple more shadows to brush over Vox’s vents as he trailed his hands to Vox’s hips, and the Television Demon arched as more laughter was dragged out of him.

“You dick!” Vox wriggled halfheartedly. “Maroon! Crimson! Amaranth!”

Alastor snickered and halted his assault. “*Amaranth*?”

Vox propped himself up on his elbows. “Goes above *chartreuse* and *Tuscan sun* on the traffic light.”

With a snort, Alastor returned his attention to Vox's hip and Vox settled back into the pillows, a wonderfully light and airy feeling in his chest as he watched Alastor play.

And when he reached around Alastor to toy with his tail, the Radio Demon leaned into his touch.

"You aren't getting these back, by the way," Vox said as he tossed the pair of red boxers in his laundry basket.

"Oh? You're just going to steal them?" Alastor asked as he prowled towards Vox and straightened his tie, catching Vox off guard.

"I am. I'm going to make sure Val sees them too," Vox scoffed. "If he wants so badly to believe there's something going on between you and me, why shouldn't I throw gasoline over the flames? Make him fucking sweat." Vox paused. "That and they're really soft and I want them."

Alastor's gaze flashed with interest and Vox hesitated in surprise. He licked his lips as he decided to test the waters.

"Maybe I'll even wear them in front of him."

Something pleased and possessive flickered behind Alastor's eyes as he smoothed out the lapels of Vox's suit.

Vox swallowed, excitement flaring in his stomach. "Let him see who I really belong to," he whispered and Alastor's smirk widened ever-so-slightly as he slowly met Vox's gaze. Vox's heart raced and he carefully reached for Alastor's hips.

Alastor stepped back at the last moment with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Consider them a gift then if you like them so much!” He smiled wickedly at Vox and Vox realised that Alastor was *teasing* him.

Well, two could play that game.

“Thank you, old pal! Now, I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to take leave. I have a lot of work to catch up on. Can’t be chit-chatting all day!”

Alastor faltered, ears drooping comically, and Vox winked at him. “Off you go!”

Alastor opened and closed his mouth, suddenly looking uncertain, and Vox plastered on a charming grin. “Unless, of course, you’d allow me to treat you to lunch?”

Alastor’s ears perked up again and he brightened and Vox barked out a laugh. So much for the stoic, mysterious Radio Demon - those ears gave away *everything*.

Alastor perched on the edge of Vox’s desk. “That depends on where you’re taking me,” he drawled, crossing one leg over the other, and Vox was once again struck by how beautiful he was.

“There’s a little café not too far from here,” Vox said nonchalantly. “Not too fancy, but serves a great coffee. I used to sit in the window with an old friend. Good memories.”

Alastor’s gaze softened. “I think I know the one.”

Vox smiled tenderly and offered his hand. “I think I’d like to make some new memories.”

Alastor let Vox pull him off the desk and Vox crooked his arm in a way that had them both reminiscing with soft smiles.

“Ever the gentleman,” Alastor commented quietly and Vox threw him a fond look and led him out of his room and into the corridors of V-Tower.

“You fucking ungrateful whore!”

Ice filled Vox’s veins and he whirled around to see a seething Valentino storming towards him, Velvette some distance behind, frowning at the three of them in confusion.

Suddenly, Valentino was in front of Vox, drawing his fist back for a blow to the face and Vox couldn’t think quickly enough to react as memories of the previous day came flooding back to him.

Alastor’s silhouette leapt at Valentino with a silent snarl of outrage, tearing ruthlessly at his antennae and wings. Beside Vox, Alastor’s fists were clenched, smile twisted into something vicious, antlers creeping taller and wider as his eyes flickered between his usual pupils and radio dials.

“Touch him and I’ll break every finger you have,” Alastor said calmly even as furious static prickled the air.

Valentino screamed, fighting uselessly against the silhouette.

“Oi! Get off him!” Velvette snapped as she raced towards them and Alastor obediently recalled the silhouette. It lurked on the wall beside them, snarling at Valentino as Velvette helped him to his feet. He lurched out of her grip with a growl.

“Get the fuck out of this tower, Radio *Bitch*,” Valentino hissed and Alastor bristled as his silhouette readied itself for another attack.

Vox itched to touch Alastor, to reassure himself that he was safe, to ground himself, but he couldn't do that with Valentino and Velvette standing there. It wasn't fair to put Alastor in that position.

"Back off, Val. I invited Alastor."

"He's our fucking *enemy*! You built an entire fortress to keep him out!"

"I invited him," Vox said again, feeling oddly subdued. "Deal with it."

Valentino's expression twisted with rage and he flared his bloodied wings and bared his teeth at Vox. "Pathetic little slut! I knew you were desperate but I can't believe you're letting the damn Radio Demon use you as a come rag-"

The silhouette pounced upon him again and Valentino crumpled to the floor with an agonised cry as it tore into him.

Suddenly, Alastor grimaced, putting a hand to his head. He recalled his wincing silhouette into dormancy as Velvette scowled at him and helped Valentino to his feet again.

"Alright, what's going on here?" she growled.

"Vox is a traitorous sack of shit-"

"Open your filthy mouth once more and I'll knot your colon around your scrawny neck and *hang you with it*," snarled Alastor.

Valentino bristled and reached for his gun and Vox's heart thundered in his chest. He slid in front of Alastor and held up a hand.

“Val, don’t!”

“Then get your ass over here,” Valentino spat and Vox recognised the jealousy in his eyes. He winced and started shuffling towards the moth-demon.

“Vox,” Alastor said softly.

Vox stilled, suddenly feeling nauseous as he was presented with a dilemma. He should stand by Alastor - beside the man that had taken care of him all night and morning; the man that was so determined to *heal* him.

...But if he didn’t join Valentino’s side... If he chose Alastor...

He *worked* with Valentino. *Lived* with him...

Fear lapped at his chest, startling him, and he took another step towards Valentino.

Alastor’s ears fell.

Vox’s heart filled with guilt and he met Alastor’s gaze. His fingers twitched towards him.

Valentino dragged him the rest of the distance, trapping him to his side as he raised his gun and aimed it between Alastor’s eyes.

“No!” Vox yelled as Valentino fired an entire round of bullets, but Alastor had already dissolved into the shadows and the bullets lodged into the wall.

Vox stared at the empty space Alastor had occupied, his heart numb.

Valentino growled in frustration and curled his claws around Vox's waist. "Asshole," he muttered under his breath before he narrowed his eyes at Vox and gripped his screen, forcing his head to tilt upwards. "You're fucking *mine*."

Vox's shoulders slumped. "Yes, Val," he said quietly. It was better not to argue. Vox was so tired of fighting, of struggling. It was easier to give in to Valentino, like he always did when the moth-demon got into one of these moods.

Still, Valentino curled his lip in disgust. "Perhaps you need a reminder. I'll give you one tonight."

"Yes, Val."

Velvette frowned. "The fuck does that mean?"

Valentino startled, obviously having forgotten that she was still there. He smiled pleasantly at her. "...Voxy and I like to play little games in the bedroom, darling. It keeps our romance... fresh. Interesting."

She wrinkled her nose and caught Vox's gaze. He blinked hollowly at her, feeling strangely drained of energy. Her frown deepened.

"Actually," she said slowly, "I need to borrow Vox later. I had a technical hitch during dress rehearsal this morning and none of the tech guys could figure out the problem. I need Vox's nerd brain."

Valentino scowled then shrugged. "Fine." His claws dug painfully into Vox's side. "But once you're finished with him, send him my way..." He smiled with too many teeth and Vox stared at the floor, mouth drawing into a thin line at the overpowering stench of Valentino's perfume.

He was nothing like Alastor, who smelled faintly of forests and sweet whisky and tea and the smallest hint of musk like he imagined wild deer would smell of-

He swallowed thickly and cast his thoughts back to that morning, remembering Alastor's gentle treatment of his body, his curiosity and fond smile, his comforting words, their shared laughter and silliness... Anything to stop him from focusing on how Valentino's fingers were digging bruises into his waist.

They continued down the corridor, Valentino keeping Vox trapped to his side as he discussed ratings and profits and other figures that Vox didn't have the energy to think about.

"You seem distracted, amorcito," Valentino said after a few minutes, deceptively concerned. "Anything you want to talk about?"

Vox raised his gaze from the floor. "Just a little tired," he lied, managing a half-hearted smile.

Valentino's gaze darkened even as his voice remained light. "Up all night with Alastor?"

A frown graced Vox's expression and he returned his gaze to the floor. "Seen Angel recently?" he grumbled and Valentino's claws ripped through his shirt, leaving small puncture wounds in his skin. Vox grimaced and returned his thoughts to the morning.

After twenty minutes or so, Velvette snagged Vox's arm and the trio parted ways. Vox followed his youngest partner into her office.

"What was the hitch?" he asked, suddenly feeling a little lighter now that he was away from Valentino.

Velvette scowled at him. "There wasn't one. The fuck is going on between you and Val?"

Vox straightened. “What? Nothing. I mean, the same as usual. Why?”

“You sounded like a robot earlier. *Yes, Val. No, Val. Whatever you want, Val.*”

A robot. Vox grimaced and wrapped his arms around himself. “I’m just tired. And you know how he gets when he’s pissed. Sometimes it’s easier to just agree with whatever he says.”

“You looked *miserable*.” Her gaze softened. “I’ve said it before, Vox... Your relationship with him is *toxic*. I don’t get why you guys don’t just break things off for good. Half the time you don’t even seem to *like* each other, never mind *love* each other.”

Vox scoffed. “This is Hell, Velvette. Love is in short supply. Couples down here aren’t in it for *love*.”

“Maybe not, but it doesn’t hurt to at least *like* each other’s company.” She pursed her lips. “What does Alastor think about all this? He doesn’t seem the type who enjoys *sharing*.” She crossed her arms. “And to be honest, I thought you’d be more loyal to him than that.”

Vox stiffened. “...Loyal? What exactly do you think is going on between us?”

She blinked, letting her arms fall to her sides. “Wait, you’re *not* together? But you two are so... You were walking arm in arm! And Alastor got so *protective* of you earlier. I just assumed he was jealous of Val...”

Vox scoffed bitterly. “He has nothing to be jealous about. Val is-” He cut himself off abruptly. He shouldn’t get Velvette involved. He shouldn’t let Velvette know what happened yesterday. She would think him weak for not fighting back, pathetic for going to Alastor for comfort, submissive, disgusting, not fit to lead the Ve-

“Val is...?”

He glanced up at her, wondering when he had lowered his gaze. He forced a charming smile. “We’re just in a rough patch. It’ll blow over. It always does.”

Velvette didn’t look so convinced. “...Well, whatever *isn’t* going on between you and Alastor, you certainly seem more relaxed around him than you do with Val.” She raised an eyebrow. “Maybe whilst you’re waiting for all of this to *blow over*, you can spend the time with Alastor instead. Half of your work you can do remotely anyway... And it might do you some good to get out of this tower.”

She frowned, concern clear in her gaze, and Vox’s shoulders sagged as anxiety prickled at his skin.

“Val and I... we’re *fine*,” he insisted.

Velvette gave him a look that said she thought otherwise. “Look, Hell isn’t exactly a place that’s bursting with happiness, so if you’re lucky enough to find it, you should hang onto it,” she said quietly. Then she crossed her arms. “But if it turns out he really is the manipulative asshole Val thinks he is, don’t be afraid to call for back-up, yeah? You have my number.”

A smile slowly pulled at Vox’s lips and he relaxed a fraction. “...Thanks, Vel.”

She winked at him then blew him a kiss as she whirled on her heel. “That goes for any other manipulative asshole too,” she called over her shoulder. “You know where to find me.”

She sauntered out of the office and Vox’s smile widened, affection for his youngest partner growing.

He glanced down at his waist, to where Valentino had ripped through his shirt, and he scowled and clenched his fists.

This was Vox’s tower. Vox’s money had paid for it. Vox’s channels aired Val’s shitty porn. Vox had given Valentino an opportunity, not the other way around. Vox had *asked* Valentino

to throw him around a bed years ago and now the asshole thought he could *control* Vox's entire life? *Wrong*.

He lifted his head a fraction higher. Alastor had called him worthy of love and tenderness. Alastor had called him *handsome*. Alastor had called him strong. Alastor *liked* his body.

Valentino was the problem. Valentino was the one making Vox miserable, making *everyone* miserable, trying to chase Alastor away, trying to *bully* Vox. Well, Vox wouldn't stand for it! He could give as good as he got. If Valentino wanted a fight, he could damn well have one!

He stormed out of the office and stalked up to Valentino's studios.

Alastor had let him pepper kisses over his ears and chest. He hadn't flinched away even though he had every right to. He hadn't looked at Vox in disgust. He hadn't muttered insults or tried to hurt Vox like Valentino had. He hadn't abandoned Vox like Valentino claimed he would. Valentino wanted to watch Vox suffer, he wanted to manipulate Vox, to beat him into submission.

He had underestimated Vox for the last time. Vox wouldn't roll over and let Valentino walk all over him again.

And he certainly wouldn't let him get away with last night.

Vox burst through the double doors with a growl and marched towards Valentino as the moth-demon finished whatever scolding he was giving a nervous-looking Angel; Angel's delicate wrist trapped in his much stronger grip.

"Get your fucking hands off him," snarled Vox, electricity sparking off his frame, and Valentino turned to him in shock.

Vox glanced at the bed, at the thick restraints and frankly torturous-looking sex toys scattered over the sheets; four beefy demons eying Angel hungrily from beside the bed.

He flicked his gaze to Angel. “Take the rest of the day off.”

Angel straightened in surprise. “Really?”

“No!” Valentino snapped and Vox grabbed his wrist, forcing him to release Angel.

“Yes, really,” Vox said with a tight smile. “Get out of here.”

Angel scuttled away without further protest and before Valentino could begin yelling, Vox grabbed him by his fur ruff and yanked him closer, smiling sharply.

“Let’s chat.”

Chapter End Notes

After so many chapters of breaking these two down, it is incredibly satisfying to start building them back up again ;)

Chapter 43: Love Is A Battlefield

Chapter Notes

Warning at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Angel had two more scenes to shoot today!” Valentino snapped as Vox shut the office door behind them - this time Valentino’s office. “You don’t see me dismissing your employees early! Just because he’s buddies with that damn Radio Bastard-”

“I told you to stop,” Vox growled and Valentino scowled, confused.

“What are you talking about?” He paused. “Wait, is this about those scenes again? I’ve already told you: the public demands their favourites in certain roles and-”

“I told you to fucking *stop!*” Vox roared, electricity racing over his frame as he whirled on Valentino and grabbed him by his shirt, and Valentino’s eyes widened in shock.

“I told you to fucking stop and you *kept going*,” Vox seethed.

Valentino hesitated, eyebrows drawing downwards as his antennae lowered. “It’s *my* business, Vox. *My* actors. Just because you don’t like it doesn’t mean the public doesn’t. I’m catering to their tastes.”

Vox shoved Valentino’s chest, sending him stumbling backwards. “*Red* means *stop*, you asshole! I asked you to stop and you fucking humiliated me! Degraded me! Treated me like shit!” He clenched his fists. “And then you have the gall to call me an *ungrateful whore?*” The lights dimmed and flickered with Vox’s mounting rage. “How fucking *dare* you!”

Valentino glanced at the lights before scowling. “You *asked* me to! You said you wanted me to throw you around! You said you liked it rough! You asked me to say all that shit! I’m only doing what you asked!”

“*Decades* ago!” Vox snarled as he advanced on Valentino. “Did it ever cross that fucking tiny mind of yours that I might not want that anymore? That I asked for it because I was upset and angry and I thought... I thought it was the only way to get someone to fucking *want* to touch me?”

Valentino bristled. “Why would you think that? You knew I loved you! The whole reason I was pissed off with you was because you can’t get your head out of Alastor’s flat ass long enough to see it! I thought the only reason you’d want me to touch you is if I let you use me to work through whatever shit was going through your head after Alastor dumped you at Roo’s mercy!”

Vox stilled, electricity still crackling over his body even as his anger faded a fraction. “What? No. You call me degrading shit all the time. You call me a freak and a whore and a pervert and a *machine*. You’re disgusted by my body. You say it every time you touch me. You... You can’t even *look* at me naked.”

Valentino bared his teeth and threw his arms out in exasperation. “You asked me to degrade you! You never asked me to stop! I’m not a fucking mind-reader, Vox!” His arms fell limply to his sides. “And I’ve already given you a solution to the body thing. Hypnotise me, blindfold me, I don’t fucking care. But don’t blame me for treating you like shit when you *asked* for it. I thought I was doing what you wanted.”

Vox stared at Valentino, unease settling in his stomach. He shook his head slowly. “No. No, you cheated on me. You *still* cheat on me. How many nights a week do you sleep with your actors?”

Valentino flared his wings. “Because you don’t fucking love me! How is it cheating when you use me as some sort of *punishment* for yourself? How do you think it makes me feel when you treat me like a tool to humiliate yourself? There’s no passion! No affection! At least my actors *pretend* to care about me. You’re so cold! Fucking you is like fucking a computer.”

Vox reeled backwards, wounded, and anger simmered low in his gut. “I asked you to *stop*,” he growled. “You should have *stopped*.”

“I was angry at you,” Valentino snapped. “I’ll always be a consolation prize to you. Second best to a man that *broke* you, who left you to die. And you never fucking listen. You’ve never cared about me, you selfish prick. You’ll never want me even after I pieced you together, even after I gave you my fucking heart!” He grabbed Vox’s arm. “Paint me the villain all you want, call me cruel and unfeeling, but the only reason I’m like that is because you hardened me. You broke my heart. You treated me like shit. You taught me that the only thing I’ll ever be good at is sex, so why not make a profit out of it?”

Vox stared at Valentino, stunned into silence as a single tear rolled down the moth-demon’s cheek.

“You’re right,” Valentino said lowly. “I’m nauseated by the sight of your body, but is that any worse than you seeing me as nothing more than a cock and a set of holes?”

Vox licked his lips, guilt eating at his chest. He shook his head. “That... That’s not true. I felt *something* for you, but you went off with Angel before it had a chance to really grow.”

The grip on his wrist eased a fraction as Valentino blinked. “What?”

“I felt... It was the same way that I felt about Alastor back in those early days,” Vox said quietly. “There was *something* there, but you... you didn’t give me time.”

Valentino tensed. “I couldn’t just wait forever and *hope* you’d come around!”

...Alastor had. Alastor was still waiting, despite everything they had done and said to each other.

Vox scowled. “I’d been betrayed by the man I loved and you fled when I got naked. Did you think I’d just fall at your feet? You made me feel like a freak.”

“You’re half machine!” Valentino snapped. “Excuse me for being weirded out by your transparent skin and mechanical organs! Watching your colon pump your lunch to your fucking asshole isn’t particularly attractive! And I doubt I’m the only one who feels that way.”

Vox shrank away from him with a frown, shame and embarrassment filling his chest. “I didn’t ask to look like this.”

“And I didn’t ask for you to treat me like a prop,” hissed Valentino. “But here we are!”

Vox wrapped his arms around himself defensively. “...I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I didn’t realise you felt that way.”

“Well, you never fucking asked, did you?” Valentino growled. “But sure, I’m the bad guy. Tell everyone I’m the problem in this relationship.”

Vox winced. “I don’t just see you as... as a cock and a set of holes. I *do* care about you, Val.”

“Do you love me?” Valentino demanded and Vox hesitated.

Valentino scoffed and shouldered past Vox. “Of course not. I bet you still love that damn bastard though. You’re such a cruel piece of shit.” He made his way to the door.

Vox whirled around to face him, wrapping his arms more securely around himself. “Wait, Val, let’s just talk about this. I’m tired of fighting. Can we figure this out? Fix things between us?”

He was struck with déjà vu. It wasn’t so long ago that he had asked Alastor the same thing. They had made great strides since then; perhaps he and Valentino could also-

“Fuck off,” growled Valentino. “Go crawl back to Alastor and see how quickly he gets bored of you this time.”

Vox clamped his mouth shut and Valentino shot him a spiteful glare. “I tried so fucking hard and it still wasn’t good enough for you. Remember that, Vox. I hope it haunts you when Alastor reveals he’s using you. *Again.*”

He slammed the door shut behind him, leaving Vox alone in the empty office. He squeezed his own arms and chewed his lip. Perhaps he really was the problem. Valentino had only been following his wishes and Vox *had* known that Valentino loved him - the moth-demon told him often enough. Perhaps Vox was selfish and cruel. He had used Valentino. Hurt him. Made him feel worthless.

He glanced up at the lights, suddenly not wanting to be alone, and he readied himself to travel to the Hazbin Hotel, but he paused.

What if Alastor didn’t want to see him? Vox had chosen to stand by Valentino’s side after all. Why would Alastor want to see him? He had every right to be furious at Vox.

Was he using Alastor too? For comfort? Did he only go to Alastor when things broke down between him and Valentino? Had Alastor noticed? He had been so desperate for Vox to *stay*...

The air popped with stressed static. He should go to his office and work. Give himself some time to think. It wasn’t fair to Alastor to keep using him as a sounding board after every fight with Valentino. Alastor would soon get bored of him and his complaints. He would figure out that Vox was selfish and cruel and manipulative and-

He squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath then headed downstairs to his office. Focus on work. He was good at that. Bury himself in emails until the fight was the furthest thought from his mind.

He padded into his office and locked the door, then turned and startled at the sight of Alastor perched behind his monitoring station.

“I got... worried,” Alastor admitted, frowning as his ears lowered. “After what he did yesterday, I wasn’t sure if he’d...” He trailed off and glanced at the monitors, which showed Valentino stalking back to the porn studios as he passed by various CCTV cameras. Alastor’s ears lowered further. “I couldn’t hear what he said to you, but I can guarantee he was manipulating you. You have every right to be furious with him.”

Vox swallowed thickly as he stared at Alastor.

He had come back.

Even after Vox had chosen Valentino over him.

“Fuck,” whispered Vox.

Alastor stood, looking hesitant, and Vox flinched. He had caused another rift between them. Alastor would soon get bored of him, especially when he realised how selfish Vox was, how cruel and unfeeling and-

“Vox,” Alastor said softly as he offered a hand for the Television Demon to take. “Would you like to talk about it? You seem... upset.”

Vox forced a smile. “I’m fine. Val just... He pointed out a couple of things that I hadn’t thought about before.”

Alastor scowled. “Like what?”

With a dismissive wave, Vox slid behind his desk and began sorting through paperwork. “A few things about me. About how I treat people. I shouldn’t be so quick to paint Val as the bad guy; I’ve treated him like crap. He does the things he does because of me, because I’ve made him that way, because I asked him to do those things to me, to say those things.” His smile

faltered and his voice cracked. “Kinda like how I hurt you. I’m pretty good at ruining relationships, at making people suffer.”

Alastor stared at him for a long moment before carefully coming to stand behind him. He placed his hands on Vox’s shoulders and rubbed the tension from them.

“What happened between you and me isn’t your fault alone. If anything, I started it.” He popped a knot from Vox’s neck and Vox trembled, suddenly feeling choked.

“And you asked Valentino to stop,” growled Alastor. “He didn’t listen.”

“Because I made him angry. Because I’ve been selfish. Because I deserved it,” Vox whispered.

Alastor whirled his chair around and caught the bottom of his screen with a soft growl. “If it had been me begging you to stop, would you have kept going?”

Vox’s eyes widened. “No! No, of course not! I would never do that to you, Al! I would never treat you like-” He cut himself off abruptly and licked his lips, frowning. “...It’s different.”

“How?” Alastor asked slowly.

“Because you... You’ve been... You were *raped*. I could never... It’s *different*.”

Alastor’s gaze softened as he brushed a hand down the side of Vox’s screen. “It isn’t different, my dear.”

“I... I gave him permission,” Vox whispered as heat crept up his neck. “Years ago. I told him to be rough with me.”

“Did you enjoy how he treated you yesterday?” Alastor asked gently as he stroked an antenna, and Vox shook his head.

“Did you want it?” Alastor asked and Vox lifted his head a fraction.

“It doesn’t matter what I wanted. I gave him permission.”

Alastor narrowed his eyes and stepped backwards from Vox, holding his arms out. “I give you permission to pin me to that desk and fuck me as ruthlessly as you can, until I’m bruised and bloody.”

Vox froze, eyes blowing wide in horror. Alastor’s expression softened. “What you want matters, Vox. Giving permission for something you wanted decades ago doesn’t give him the right to ignore what you want now. You asked him to stop and he didn’t. You told him that you didn’t want it, yet he pushed for it anyway.”

Vox began to tremble. “No, he... he had every right to do what he did, to *punish* me. I treated him like shit. I used him. He loves me and I treat him like a consolation prize.”

Alastor’s ears pricked up angrily as he bared his teeth. “If he loved you, he wouldn’t degrade you! He wouldn’t pluck at your insecurities! He wouldn’t hurt you! He wouldn’t punish you!”

Vox stared at Alastor for a moment. “You did,” he whispered and Alastor’s expression dropped as quickly as his ears did.

“I... I never *wanted*...” He trailed off and hunched his shoulders and Vox felt tears threatening to slide down his screen as he watched Alastor wrestle with his own emotions.

Finally, Alastor lifted his glassy gaze. “I’m sorry,” he said, choked. “You deserved better.”

Vox waited. He waited for the *'but'*, for the *'you hurt me too'*. He waited for the *'you have Valentino now'* or the *'I tried to apologise but you wouldn't listen.'*

It never came.

Alastor looked *distraught* and Vox watched him run a hand through his ruffled hair, eyes wide with stress. "I'm sorry," he said again, desperately, and Vox suddenly realised why he trusted Alastor more than he trusted Valentino, why he felt more *comfortable* around Alastor.

Alastor took responsibility for his own mistakes. He didn't blame them on Vox or punish Vox for confronting him about them. He apologised and tried to rectify them.

"You used to be so confident and optimistic," said Alastor with a frantic look in his eyes. "And I *destroyed* you. I ruined you. I... I made you so *miserable*..." He clutched at his hair so tightly that Vox worried he might pull it out.

Vox opened his arms in invitation. "Come here," he demanded and Alastor threw him a wild glance.

"I broke you."

Vox managed a weak smile. "I think we broke each other. But we're slowly piecing one another back together." He huffed quietly. "And my self-confidence was shot long before I met you, Al. If anything, you helped to rebuild it."

"And then I destroyed it again."

Vox's shoulders slumped a fraction. "Come here, Al. I want to hold you. I... I want..." He swallowed and met Alastor's gaze. "I just want you."

Alastor froze and Vox panicked that he'd pushed too fast and too far, but when he next blinked, he had a lap full of whimpering Radio Demon.

Alastor buried his face into Vox's neck and Vox released a shaky breath as he wrapped his arms tightly around the other man.

"I'm sorry," Alastor whispered against his neck and Vox shuddered and tangled his fingers in Alastor's hair.

"I know," he murmured. "I'm sorry too. For choosing him over you. For dragging you into all this shit. You don't need this."

"I want to be here for you," Alastor said into his neck as he curled his fingers into Vox's back. "I want you to be able to come to me with anything that's bothering you, even if that happens to be Valentino. I want you to feel safe with me, Vox."

"I do," whispered Vox and he pressed a slow kiss to the top of Alastor's head, then froze at his own instinctive actions. He swallowed thickly. "Shit," he whimpered as he squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face into Alastor's hair. "What do I do? Tell me what to do. How do I... How do I get him to stop? Do I leave him? What if... What if he won't let me? I... I can't keep doing this to you, Al! I can't keep using you for comfort every time I have an argument with him! I can't keep going back to him right after we get this close and-"

He leaned backwards, forcing Alastor to look at him. "What the fuck are we?" he asked hysterically. "What... What are we doing? Are we friends? Something more? I don't... I don't understand what we are! I'm supposed to be with Val but it doesn't feel right and I *love you* but there's far too much history between us and you've got a whole heap of trauma about men and touch and yet you keep letting me touch you and hold you and I don't *understand* what the fuck any of this means! Just... tell me what to do, Alastor. Tell me what I'm supposed to do."

Alastor seemed startled by the outburst and it took him a few moments to collect himself. Then, he licked his lips and cupped Vox's face between his hands.

“I can’t tell you what to do, Vox. That’s for you to figure out. Perhaps start by asking yourself what you want?”

Panic threaded through Vox’s chest and Alastor carefully leaned their foreheads together. “Whatever you choose, I’ll be right by your side, my love.”

My love.

Vox closed his eyes and slid his hands around Alastor’s hips as a strange sense of calm settled over him. “What do *you* want, Al?”

There was a short pause. “You,” Alastor admitted. “But I want you to be happy, even if that means helping you to mend your bond with Valentino.”

Unlike Valentino, who wanted to sever the bond between Vox and Alastor.

It suddenly clicked for Vox. Both Valentino and Alastor claimed to love him, but only one of them actually *did*.

Something old and frayed sewed itself back together in Vox’s chest and he felt warm and light and... and *happy*.

“I don’t know how to end it,” Vox whispered as he smoothed his palms up and down Alastor’s sides, watching for any subtle flinching or shifting. “He’s right, I’ve never wanted him as much as I want you. I used him because I couldn’t have you, because I thought he was the next best thing.”

Alastor slid a hand up his chest and Vox leaned into his touch. “Tell him,” he whispered tentatively. “When you’re ready.”

When he was ready. Unlike Valentino, Alastor *was* willing to wait for him, even after all these decades.

Vox caught Alastor's hand and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. For a moment, Alastor tensed, then he melted into Vox and nuzzled into his neck.

"...What does this mean for us?" Vox asked quietly. "Where does this put us?"

"Does it need a label?" Alastor asked quietly. "Can we not wait and see? Perhaps something will come of it and perhaps nothing will come of it."

A tentative smile pulled at Vox's lips. "So, just... enjoy the ride?"

"Live in the moment," Alastor teased before he pressed a sweet kiss to Vox's neck.

Vox held him close and after a while, he stroked an ear. "Are you sure you're okay with this?"

Alastor curled a hand around the back of Vox's neck and leaned just far enough away to fix him with a solemn look.

"There is no one I trust more than you, my dear. You taught me to enjoy touch once before - I have faith you can do it again." His expression dimmed. "...However, there will be some things I can never do, so if that bothers you, then perhaps-"

"Your company is enough," Vox whispered. "You loving me is enough. Anything else is a bonus and I won't love you any less for the pieces of yourself that you can't give me. After all, I already have your heart."

Alastor was silent for a long moment. Then he grinned. "Tacky picturebox."

Vox beamed. “You love it. Admit it.”

Alastor’s gaze warmed and he spread his fingers over Vox’s heart and traced his other hand down the edge of his screen. “I love *you*, my dear.”

Screen tingeing red even as his heart healed a little more, Vox’s grin widened. “Cheesy fossil.”

Alastor barked out a startled laugh. “*Fossil?* Hm... Perhaps I take it all back. Maybe we should go back to fighting.”

“Maybe you should shut up and let me pet your ears.”

Alastor brightened and buried his face into Vox’s neck once more and Vox held him securely as he toyed with a fluffy ear.

“Too easy,” Vox teased and Alastor suddenly snaked his hands beneath Vox’s shirt and slid his fingers into his vents.

“Asshole!” Vox laughed even as he held Alastor tighter.

Valentino had sulked and stewed in his own thoughts and anger. He had fucked one of his whores to clear his head and now he felt calm enough to return to Vox and comfort him. He knew the Television Demon would be buried in work, trying to ignore their argument, and he knew Vox would overthink the accusations that had been tossed around.

They said anything to hurt each other during those sorts of arguments. Their words were often dipped in truth but it was easier to skip past those parts. It wasn't as though they could fix them anyway.

And perhaps he had gone a little too far with Vox yesterday, pushed him too hard, *upset* him... but Valentino was upset too! They were only words, anyway. A couple of ass smacks too. It wasn't as though he had hurt Vox sexually. In fact, he had been pretty vanilla. Vox would get over it; repress it like he always did. Words were cheap - they meant nothing.

Time to show Vox why he was better than Alastor. He could give Vox things that Alastor couldn't - sex, for one thing. Loyalty. Stability. Alastor had offered a truce and that's all this was - Vox was entertained by the shiny new toy that had fallen into his lap, but Alastor would wander off again eventually and Vox would pout and complain and nothing would come of it. He would crawl back to Valentino like he always did. Valentino would punish him for straying, for letting his eyes wander, but he wouldn't mean it, not really.

Because Vox *always* came back to him. He needed Valentino and perhaps that was better than *love*. What was more wonderful than a powerful Overlord like Vox *needing* him?

Vox was his.

He smiled at the thought. Vox would always be his, in ways that even his whores couldn't be. He could do anything he wanted to Vox and the man would still slink into his lap and beg to be touched. He was such a needy little thing. So desperate and broken.

He couldn't be fixed but Valentino would give him what he asked for. He was generous like that. He liked how Vox craved him. He liked how *responsive* Vox was to his words and touch. He liked how Vox could switch his pain receptors off and let Valentino do whatever he liked. He liked how Vox could so easily repair his electronics and mechanics - he could be as rough as he wanted with the Television Demon and it didn't matter. He could choke Vox and it wouldn't kill him because he would switch to mechanical breathing and it was weird and ugly but it was *useful*, because Valentino could see how far he could push before it was too much - he could see what would and wouldn't work on his more delicate actors. Being with Vox gave him inspiration for new scenes.

He smiled to himself. Perhaps he could offer Vox a distraction from work, maybe even offer a half-hearted apology if that's what was necessary. Like Vox, he was tired of arguing.

He arrived at Vox's office and nearly pushed inside, but froze when he noticed that Vox wasn't alone.

He *was* working, signing paperwork at a leisurely pace as none other than *Alastor* perched in his lap, face buried in his neck, looking entirely too relaxed as Vox rubbed his back with his spare hand. They were both smiling fondly, looking comfortable.

More comfortable than Vox had *ever* looked with Valentino.

White hot fury bubbled inside Valentino and his nails bit into his palms.

Why did Alastor get to have Vox at his softest? Alastor had abandoned him! Had tried to kill him! How was it fair that after five decades of contempt and loathing, Alastor still got to see the best of Vox whilst Valentino was left with the shit? What did Vox *see* in the damn bastard? Didn't he understand that Alastor would leave him eventually? That he was merely toying with Vox's mechanical heart?

He bristled as Alastor traced patterns over Vox's chest with a gentle finger, as though he *owned* Vox. As though he had every right to swoop in after fifty years and snatch Vox from Valentino.

Fine. *Fine*.

Alastor wanted a war? He could damn well have one.

Valentino stalked away with a snarl.

Warnings: Discussions of rape

I promise I will eventually answer all of your comments! I still read them all even if I'm slow to respond!

You guys were asking for Alastor to confess, so here it is ;)

Chapter 44: #Trending

Chapter Notes

Warning at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Vox straightened his tie with a smile as he waited for the cameras to begin rolling. He enjoyed presenting, even if he didn't get much opportunity to perform these days.

He was releasing a new piece of tech - a watch that could scan strangers and analyse what sort of magic they possessed. There were bugs and it didn't currently work on all types of magic - Alastor's silhouette, for example, didn't even register as an entity - but Vox was quite proud of the prototype.

Once the presentation ended, the room would be opened up to questions and the editing team would cut the boring questions and air the whole interview tomorrow afternoon. Tonight however, Alastor was taking him out for drinks to celebrate his success.

His smile widened as his heart fluttered in an old, familiar way.

"Vox! Vox!"

He looked up at Velvette's frantic shouting and his youngest partner scrambled onto the set with an almost panicked look as she held out her phone.

"Valentino made a new video and he released it on Sinstagram late last night." She swallowed. "Half of Hell is talking about it."

Vox frowned and took the phone from Velvette. "For fuck's sake. How much damage control are we talk-" He cut himself off, eyes blowing wide as his veins turned to ice.

“...You’ve got to warn Alastor,” Velvette whispered. “He doesn’t use social media. He won’t know...”

Electricity raced over Vox’s frame as the phone slid from his grip and hit the floor. Vox stared at Velvette in frozen horror. “...Why would he... Why would he post that?” The air grew thick with anxious static. “What the *fuck*? Why would he...?”

Velvette licked her lips and hesitated. “...Is it true?”

He stared at her for a long moment before his gaze hardened. “Delete it. Quickly. Every thread, every post, every discussion - I want it *wiped* from social media. No one is allowed to talk about it *anywhere*.” He clenched his fists. “And post from Valentino’s account that he got hacked. That the video was meant to go through quality control and be released on one of my channels as the first of a series of specials featuring Overlords and celebrities. It’s a scene, nothing more.” He bared his teeth. “Then delete Valentino’s fucking account.”

He phased into the lights and soared through the powerlines, towards the hotel.

“As this show reaches its final half hour, it’s time to open the airwaves to requests,” drawled Alastor as he leaned back in his worn leather swivel chair; newly repaired cane in his grip, the microphone tipped towards his lips. It was wonderful to have access to all of his powers again.

And once his show had ended, he would get to spend the rest of the evening with his beloved Television Demon. Things were finally starting to look up, it seemed.

“Let’s stick to tonight’s theme,” he purred, enjoying himself. “Rhythm and blues only, please.”

He waited for his desk to flash as calls started queueing up. He pressed a small button, opening the line.

“And who’s our lucky first caller?”

“Hex,” replied a nasally voice.

Alastor crossed one leg over the other. “A cursed name,” he hummed. “Tell us what you’d like to hear.”

The demon rattled off a request and Alastor quickly found the song. The rest of the show followed a similar pattern, with sinners briefly introducing themselves and requesting various songs and Alastor having no problems finding them.

Everything ran smoothly until he reached the last caller.

“May I ask who I’m speaking to?” Alastor asked airily.

“Cumdaddy sixty-nine,” snickered the caller and Alastor restrained a sigh. There would always be idiots in Hell. Unfortunately it was quite unavoidable, even on his radio show.

“Hm... There’s no need to state your IQ; I only asked for your name. What song would you like to request?”

There was another muffled snicker - perhaps from the caller’s friend.

“*It’s Raining Men*,” said the caller and a laugh sounded from his friend.

Alastor closed his eyes. “I’m afraid that doesn’t fit tonight’s theme. Let’s move to our next caller-”

“Wait! Play the first song you listened to after you took three dicks up the ass!”

There was another round of laughter as Alastor froze. It took a moment for him to collect himself.

“...What did you say?” he asked, smile strained and filters distorting his voice.

“I said: what was the first song you listened to after those three guys made you their bitch?”

“Do you spit or swallow, Mister Radio Demon?” shouted the friend and both callers burst into laughter.

Alastor’s claws bit into the mixing desk as a potent combination of fear and rage threatened to drown him.

No.

Please, no.

“How much for me to have a ride?”

“Is it buy one and a friend goes free?”

Alastor stared at the flashing line, ears pinned to his skull. His hands were shaking. He couldn’t breathe.

“Or maybe you like to be *chased*?”

“Hunted like a sweet little fawn!”

Alastor’s cane slid from his grip, clattering to the floor. He bolted to his feet, startled by the noise, and whirled around, scanning for threats with wide eyes and his chest heaving. His stomach rolled.

“You still there, Mister Radio Demon?”

“Would you like us to fuck you, Mister Radio Demon?”

Alastor dry heaved then snarled and snatched his microphone.

“You insolent *wretches*. I’m going to hunt you down and-”

“Suck our cocks?” crowed one of the callers before there was an eruption of laughter and the line went dead.

Alastor stared at the flashing lights that indicated there were more callers waiting. He trembled and realised he was sweating. He took a breath to steady himself and ran a hand through his hair.

“Apologies for the crude interruption to tonight’s show,” he said as calmly as he could manage. “I’m afraid that’s all we have time for tonight, but make sure to join us tomorrow evening for more quality entertainment, where we delve into the history of soul music. Thank you, and goodnight.” He played one last track to end the show and he sucked in one breath after the next.

They couldn't know. It had to be a coincidence. There were so few people who knew. Rosie would never utter a word and Lucifer knew the human lives of every sinner by default but he was above such pettiness, and Vox... no, he would keep that secret until his second grave. There was no one else. No one else knew.

Icy dread filled his chest.

No one except *Valentino*.

He... He wouldn't.

He *couldn't*.

Vox would never let him.

Valentino had kept the secret for *decades*, why would he-

It had to be a coincidence. It *had* to be.

He wondered when he'd sunk to the floor, knees tucked to his chest and fingers digging into his own scalp painfully. He sucked in breath after breath and threw himself against the mixing desk when there was a buzz and a *pop*.

Someone had come to pin him down and-

"Shit," Vox breathed as he raced to Alastor's side. "Shit, Al, I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. I didn't know about the post until this morning." He reached for Alastor, likely to attempt to comfort him, but Alastor leaned away from him with a panicked gaze.

“What are you talking about?”

Vox stared at him for a long moment, expression haunted, and he slowly fished his phone out of his pocket and tapped at it before gingerly passing it to Alastor.

Alastor watched, frozen, as a video of an actor dressed like him ran through a clearly fake forest, pursued by three figures dressed in black; faces obscured. It didn't take long for the figures to catch up to the actor dressed as him and he was shoved to the ground, stripped of clothes, and the other three figures stripped off too before restraining the main actor and-

Alastor held his breath and scrolled off the video, wincing as the sound continued - begs and whimpers and pleas for the three figures to *stop* carrying over what appeared to be the background music '*It's Raining Men*'. The cheery tune jarred with the actor's cries for help and Alastor focused on the caption below, trying to mentally block out the noise.

A well-kept secret of the infamous Radio Demon - in his human life, he was the victim of a hot and sexy foursome! Like prey, he was chased and eventually caught by three handsome men who took advantage of his cock-sucking lips and tight ass. This video is an accurate account of what happened one fateful night to the young and naive Alastor...

There were *thousands* of comments. Some that Valentino had replied to, confirming that he had reliable sources, that he had confronted Alastor about it once and that Alastor had *confessed*. There was clear excitement amongst the commenters, some describing what they wanted to do to Alastor, some asking if that was why he bore deer characteristics, some asking Valentino to create more content on the rape, to make the actor playing Alastor seem more *afraid*-

He dropped the phone and vomited, pulling a few strands of hair out in his distress. He struggled to breathe and he squeezed his eyes shut as his silhouette broke loose and began tearing up his radio tower.

A hand landed on his shoulder.

Alastor snarled and whipped around, fingers closing around his attacker's neck.

Vox recoiled quickly, holding his hands up in submission and Alastor released him with wide eyes.

"I'm sorry," he breathed but Vox shook his head dismissively and swallowed.

"Velvette and my staff are working to scrub the posts and start damage control. We... We can fix this." He sounded uncertain and Alastor shook his head frantically.

"They already know, Vox! It can't be taken back! Even if you get rid of it, people have seen it and they're talking about it and every time they see me in the street, they'll look at me like prey, like I'm *weak*, and they'll start hunting me and-"

"I won't let them," Vox growled. "I'll fucking kill anyone who even *dares*."

Alastor realised that there were tears rolling down his cheeks, entire body shaking as he clutched his hair and heaved in deep, panicked breaths. He felt like he was simultaneously drowning and burning alive.

"Fuck," he cursed. "This is exactly what I was trying to avoid all those years ago. This is exactly why I started pushing you away. Because if you stand in their way, they'll come for you too and I can't be the reason you face what I did. I can't watch you be-" He cut himself off and threw Vox a wild look. "Go back to V-Tower. Don't come back. This is... Whatever it is, it's over. We can't... *I can't*..." He shook his head. "Leave. You're safer without me."

"No, fuck that," snarled Vox fiercely. "We've done this dance before and we both ended up miserable and broken. I'm not fucking leaving you again, Alastor. I'm going to fight for you."

Fear made Alastor shrink in on himself. "*Please*, Vox. Please don't put yourself at risk for... for..."

“For you?” Vox finished quietly. “I *love* you, Al. Of course I’m not leaving you. Of course I want to protect you.” His expression hardened. “Damn it, Alastor, we’re *Overlords*. Neither of us are weak. Sinners should think twice about attacking either of us.”

Alastor met Vox’s gaze and the Television Demon grinned viciously. “I know you, Smiles. I know how strong you are. Anyone who dares attempt to touch you, you’ll tear them apart in a heartbeat, and anyone you miss, I’ll fucking fry them alive.”

Alastor blinked, ears slowly rising.

“We made a mistake last time,” Vox continued, his tone strangely soothing in its fierceness. “We pushed each other away, left each other when we should have stood together, but we won’t make that mistake again. You’re *mine*, Al. Anyone who hurts you has to answer to me.” He held out a hand. “No one will manage to lay a fucking finger on either of us. We’ll kill them together, yeah?”

Alastor stared at Vox’s offered hand before slowly lifting his gaze to the other man’s face. He felt... warm and calm and his heart fluttered wildly in his chest. He slid his hand into Vox’s and Vox smiled, clearly pleased. Perhaps even *proud*.

“You might be a victim of something terrible,” said Vox as he rubbed Alastor’s knuckles with his thumb, “but you are intelligent and deadly and one of the most powerful demons to grace Pentagram City. You aren’t your trauma. *Never* forget what you’re capable of.”

Alastor stared at Vox for a long moment before he squeezed his hand. “Hold me. I... I want you to hold me.”

Vox slowly snaked an arm around his waist and tugged him closer and Alastor pressed into Vox’s side and tucked his head under his chin with a shaky sigh.

Safe.

He was safe.

For the first time *ever*.

Vox wouldn't leave him. Vox *believed* in him. He didn't see Alastor as a mere victim; he saw Alastor as deadly and powerful. To Vox, he wasn't *prey*. He wasn't a little fawn.

To Vox, they were a team. Sharks in a pond of big, oblivious fish. They'd fight together and they would *win*. They would tear into anyone who challenged them.

He nuzzled into Vox's neck gratefully and Vox slid a hand into his hair as his other splayed possessively over Alastor's back. Alastor slipped an arm around Vox, pushing closer, and Vox pressed a firm kiss to the top of his head.

"You'll *never* go through that again," Vox whispered into his hair. "I won't let anyone touch you like that ever again."

Alastor's eyes slid shut and he melted against Vox, inhaling his clean, coppery scent and relishing his warmth and the gentle hum of his electronics.

He was safe and loved and Vox didn't think any less of him for what he had faced. Unlike Harriet, Vox would stand beside him when he needed it most. He would... He would *protect* Alastor.

Alastor had never been protected by anyone before. He was used to having to rely on himself, but Vox... He trusted Vox.

"Val won't get away with this," Vox growled as he petted one of Alastor's ears. "I'll make sure of it."

Oh, that was lovely, thought Alastor. He very much enjoyed Vox being protective of him. He nuzzled Vox's neck again before pressing a deep kiss to it and Vox tightened his grip on him.

His silhouette paused its rampage to stare at Vox and it slithered closer. Alastor watched it carefully. "Be nice," he growled at it as he curled his arm possessively around Vox's middle.

Vox watched it warily, still petting Alastor's ear. "I come in peace," he murmured and the silhouette suddenly softened and sank beside Vox, looking cautious but hopeful. A relieved smile pulled at Vox's mouth and he opened an arm in invitation.

"You wanna get in on this?"

The silhouette grinned and snuggled into Vox's other side and Vox resumed massaging Alastor's ear.

"It's been a long time since you've been nice to me," Vox said softly and the silhouette gave him a sheepish look before burying its face into his shoulder. "I still have scars," Vox chided quietly and both Alastor and his silhouette winced at that.

Vox's mouth pressed into an unhappy line. "I suppose I was pretty shitty to you both as well though. And you act on Al's emotions, so I guess it's understandable - he's been through a lot." He squeezed Alastor's ear and pressed a kiss to his hair. "Damn, I've missed this," he whispered. "I'm sorry. To both of you."

Alastor's silhouette wriggled deeper into Vox's side as Alastor felt something knit back together in his chest. He had felt a lot of that around Vox recently - little pieces of himself being mended; his heart being slowly stitched together again after every warm smile and kind word and tender touch. Vox was healing him, despite all odds, despite the pain they had inflicted upon each other over the past fifty years.

Vox was also the only one who spoke to his silhouette like it was its own entity, like a person. No one else acknowledged it as having its own will; most thinking it was a mere extension of Alastor's powers. Vox had always treated it differently, had always respected it instead of fearing it. It was one of many reasons that he was so special.

They stayed like that for a while; Alastor and his silhouette clinging to Vox as the Television Demon rubbed Alastor's ears and his back and pressed gentle kisses to his crown whenever the urge came over him.

"Stay with me tonight?" Alastor requested softly after some time.

A smile pulled at Vox's lips and he gently squeezed Alastor. "Of course."

Alastor huffed a sigh of relief and curled deeper into Vox.

The next morning, Alastor awoke in his hotel room to Vox wrapped around him like an octopus. He chuckled to himself and enjoyed the warmth and the soothing buzz of electronics and the contented frequency for a few minutes before slowly untangling himself.

It was strange waking up to a man's body pressed against his back, being able to feel every dip and rise and crevice flush against his full length, yet not feeling any fear or anxiety or disgust. Granted, they were both clothed, but still, this just further proved that Vox was special.

Alastor slipped out of bed and couldn't resist a glance back at the Television Demon.

Vox smiled lazily at him, one eye cracked open.

He had let Alastor struggle out of his hold.

Alastor narrowed his eyes half-heartedly and Vox's smirk widened, so Alastor disappeared into the bathroom, a light feeling in his chest.

He flicked on a small, waterproof, modern radio that he would never admit to owning as he set about his morning routine, listening distantly to the morning news.

Riots, territory disputes, new Overlords, same old same old. It wasn't until Alastor had dried himself off and begun to slide on his robe did anything catch his attention.

"...And so you've heard it here first, folks. The infamous Radio Demon was indeed raped in his human life! It seems he isn't as tough and clever as he pretends to be," chirped a cheery feminine voice. *"Now, Fender, you said on Earth you were known as Jacob Anderson?"*

Alastor's knees threatened to buckle and he threw a hand heavily against the door to support himself.

Jacob Anderson.

One of the men from that night.

"Alastor?" Vox called, but Alastor couldn't move or respond as he stared at the radio, breaths growing shallower and faster as he listened to his attacker *gloat* about the things he did to Alastor and his parents on live radio.

"...So his mother goes down like a sack of pigshit and this scrawny twenty-something kid is staring at me in horror, right? He's a witness, so my buddies and I chase him into the woods, and we were gonna just kill him, but, fuck, he's a pretty little thing. That Valentino guy has it right - great lips for sucking dicks and the tightest ass you'll ever see and-"

Alastor fell to his knees and he wrapped an arm around himself as he clutched at his hair.

"...And he's fucking sobbing. Ass up, face in the dirt. Everyone thinks he's this mysterious, powerful bastard, right? But I've never heard a guy wail like that-"

Alastor trembled, cheeks burning in humiliation as he lowered his head and suddenly, the radio flicked to a different station and slow pop music lilted out of it.

Vox kneeled beside him. “May I hold you?” he asked softly and Alastor hesitated then nodded as tears trickled down his cheeks. He hid his face from Vox.

Vox tugged him into his chest carefully, rubbing his back and gently pulling Alastor’s hand around him to stop him from ripping out his own hair.

He said nothing for a long time, merely holding Alastor and letting him cry silently into his chest, but Alastor could feel the fury building in Vox’s static, the fierce protectiveness as he held Alastor tighter to him.

Finally, Alastor’s tears dried and he buried his face in Vox’s neck. He felt safe here, wrapped in Vox’s arms and static, breathing in his clean, coppery scent. Vox wouldn’t leave. Vox wouldn’t toss him aside like everyone else had once they learned of what had happened. Vox wouldn’t mock or ridicule him. Vox was *safe*.

“We’ll make them pay,” Vox growled into his ear. “They won’t get away with this. I promise. We’ll remind them of why they should respect you. Why they should *fear* you.”

Alastor was suddenly overwhelmed by love and gratitude for the wonderful man holding him, and he leaned back, caught Vox’s screen in one hand, and kissed him deeply.

Vox fell pliant beneath him and slowly curled his hand around the back of Alastor’s neck, and when Alastor pulled back slightly for air, Vox chased his lips.

With a shaky breath, Vox pressed his head against Alastor’s and stroked the nape of his neck with his thumb. “Fuck, I love you,” he whispered and Alastor kissed him again, hard and desperate.

Kissing Vox was like finally coming home. It was like achieving a goal he never thought he'd reach. It was everything he needed and more than he could have asked for.

His lips were soft, which was really strange because the man had a television for a *head*. Yet, Alastor's mouth moulded against Vox's perfectly. His teeth were sharp as he caught Alastor's bottom lip between them, and Alastor's tail stood upright, cautious at the danger, at the *predator* holding him, but still he ached to press closer, to let Vox take care of him.

Vox's tongue was soft and curious as he licked at Alastor's lips, as he *tasted* Alastor, and Alastor should *run*, should flee from the predator trying to devour him, yet he found himself opening his lips and letting Vox lap inside his mouth.

Vox's breath hitched as their tongues met and when they parted, Vox's gaze was a little glazed. "So fucking beautiful," he breathed as he wound an arm around Alastor's waist. "So good to me." He nipped Alastor's lip, fingers wrapping tightly around his hip.

Alastor's ears lowered submissively as he curled his fingers into Vox's shirt and Vox gazed at him adoringly. "You okay?"

Alastor suddenly began to tremble. "I... I don't..."

Vox's smile fell. "Colour?"

Alastor couldn't think clearly. He wanted Vox. *Green*. He wanted to keep kissing Vox. He wanted Vox to keep holding him. He should say *green*. He loved Vox. He needed Vox. He needed to say *green*. He needed...

"Red," Alastor whispered and then he frowned at himself in surprise.

Vox released him and Alastor scrambled away from him, chest heaving, shoulders tense and tail flashing in panic. His eyes widened.

What the fuck?

Vox watched him carefully, looking a little upset. “You okay? What... What do you need me to do?”

Alastor stared at him. “I don’t... I don’t know.” His nails bit into his palms.

What just happened?

“Can you tell me what I did wrong?” Vox asked quietly and Alastor shook his head helplessly.

“I don’t know,” he said again, frustrated, but when Vox edged towards him, he plastered himself against the wall tiles, body tensing. Then, he scowled at himself in confusion.

Vox froze and backed away, looking distraught. “Al, what did I do? Was it the comment? Did I hurt you? What happened?”

“I don’t know!” Alastor snapped before he ran a hand through his hair and winced. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean- I... I just don’t know.”

He gritted his teeth, anger boiling over. “No wonder they think I’m weak!” he snarled. “I can’t even *kiss* you without being afraid! What the fuck is wrong with me? Why am I so *broken*?”

Vox blinked and his gaze softened. “Al, you’re doing so well-”

“I’m a pathetic mess!”

“You were okay until the end.”

“I ran!” Alastor snapped. “I always run! I always leave you when you trust me not to! It isn’t fair! Not after everything you’ve faced, everything I’ve put you through. You deserve so much better, so much *more* than I’ll ever be able to give you.”

It was Vox’s turn to scowl. “Listen to me, Alastor. Just being with you makes me happy. Holding you makes me feel like the luckiest man in all the universe. If getting to keep you means I’ll never get to kiss you, then that’s a small price to pay for being with the man I love.”

Alastor bared his teeth, anger and frustration overwhelming him. “I *want* to kiss you!”

Vox hesitated, contemplating, getting ready to *coddle* Alastor like he was a frightened animal, or a young child. “You’ve been through so much-”

“And I should be able to go about my afterlife like every other *degenerate* down here!” Alastor snarled. “But instead, I’m controlled by my past!” He bared his teeth at the radio. “And now everyone else damn well knows it too!”

“You’ve been traumatised,” Vox protested patiently. “No one expects you to just... get over something like that.”

“It has been a hundred years,” Alastor growled. “I *should* be over it. I should... I shouldn’t be this afraid.” He frowned. “Not of you, at least. Not when I know you would never...” He trailed off and looked away in shame. “I can’t be what you want me to be.”

Vox observed him for a long while. “You’re already everything I want, Al.”

Alastor's eyes slid shut. "I can't do this. I'll never get past this part. Go home, Vox. Find someone who can give you everything you want. I'm damaged goods."

Static prickled angrily at Alastor's skin and he looked up in surprise to find Vox scowling at him, fists clenched.

"Stop fucking pushing me away!" Vox snapped. "Stop fucking telling me what I want! Stop assuming you know what's best for me, you self-sacrificing asshole!" Electricity bounced between his antennae. "*You* bring out the best in me. *You* make me feel valued and worthy. *You* make me happy! You make me feel fucking *loved*, asshat! Don't you *dare* push me away again just when I was starting to hope! Just when I was learning to trust you again. I deserve better than you *giving up*. I've waited fifty fucking years for you - we've faced so much *shit* to get to this point. You are not fucking giving up because of *this*. Because of one failed *kiss!*"

Alastor blinked as Vox's chest heaved with rage and frustration and distress. He pointed a shaky finger at Alastor. "Fuck you. I'm not Harriet. I'm not the friends that stopped talking to you because they didn't know what to say; you're not getting rid of me that easily. I'm staying by your side, no matter how many times you say *red*. No matter how many of my shirts you ruin with your disgusting snot and tears."

Alastor's eyes widened and he barked out a startled laugh before abruptly cutting himself off.

They stared at each other for a moment before Vox tentatively opened his arms in invitation. "Shit happens. We don't give up because of it. Now, come here, Al. You don't have to kiss me, but you can if you want. I don't care either way as long as I get to be with you."

Alastor's shoulders relaxed inch by inch and he crawled along the floor and melted into Vox's arms, burying his face into the Television Demon's neck. Vox blew out a relieved breath and held him tightly.

"You okay?" Vox whispered and Alastor exhaled shakily, feeling like a heavy weight had finally been lifted from his back. Vox would fight for him. Vox would wait for him. Vox would teach him how to fight for *them*.

Vox would love him through his mistakes.

“Yes. Thank you, my dear. For everything.”

Vox stroked a fluffy ear. “We can do this. We can get through anything if we stick together. We’re bound to make mistakes and that’s *fine*.”

Alastor smoothed a hand up and down Vox’s side, smiling when Vox leaned into his touch. So *needy*...

“I’m sorry,” Alastor whispered. “I’ll do better.”

“I just want us to stop pushing each other away,” Vox breathed. “It makes us both miserable. I want us to trust each other again. I want... I want us to be happy again.”

That sounded nice.

Alastor couldn’t remember the last time he had been truly happy.

He licked his lips and leaned back a fraction to study Vox’s face. When Vox smiled tentatively at him, Alastor tilted forwards and pressed their mouths together once more.

Vox let him control the pace, kissing back gently, still caressing his ear and holding him loosely, giving Alastor a chance to back off if he needed to. Alastor felt... comfortable.

Careful, closed-mouth kissing grew deeper and longer and it wasn’t long before Alastor lost himself in the taste of Vox’s lips. Vox’s frequency was soothing and calm, his static light and playful and *oh* Vox was *wonderful*. Why hadn’t they done this sooner?

A chuckle tumbled out of Vox, passing into Alastor, and Alastor's ears pricked up at the pleasant sound and he slid a hand behind Vox's head, toying with his ports. Vox grinned against his mouth.

"Careful, I might think you have a *kink*," Vox teased.

Alastor sent a burst of static into two of his ports and Vox's breath hitched.

"As much as I loathe modern technology, this head of yours has its perks," Alastor purred as he traced a finger over another port. "I daresay I prefer this one over the others. There's a lot to... *explore*."

Vox's screen tinged red and Alastor smirked and began peppering kisses over it. "Yes, I definitely appreciate the sharper colours of this new screen."

Vox's fans flicked on softly and Alastor settled into the game. "How handsome you are, indeed. All these tantalising ports and tempting buttons. Those alluring silver tracks that paint your skin. The sparkling lights that illuminate this perfect body of yours... My dear, I've never seen anyone so beguiling. Your body is a work of art and it's such a pity you prefer to hide it."

Vox's face burned crimson. "Yeah, well... you're the only one who thinks that."

Alastor captured Vox's lips again, pleased when they fell pliant against his. "Are you surprised that Hell doesn't appreciate beauty?"

Vox leaned away from him, fans working harder as he averted his gaze and Alastor smirked and mouthed at his neck. Vox's breath hitched and he tangled his fingers in Alastor's hair. "Al..."

Alastor hummed in pleasure and peppered kisses up the side of Vox's screen, and Vox splayed a possessive hand around his waist.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted this,” Vox whispered, eyes slipping shut. “How long I’ve wanted *you*.”

Alastor huffed in amusement. “I have *some* idea,” he murmured as he drew a hand up to Vox’s chest and spread his fingers over his heart.

Vox caught his hand and brought his knuckles to his lips and heat crept to Alastor’s cheeks unexpectedly. Vox glanced up at him, lips fluttering over his knuckles, and he smirked at Alastor’s expression.

“See? I can be classy too, Mister Radio Demon.”

Alastor bit back a laugh and settled into Vox’s side, watching as Vox pressed kisses to each of his fingers and his palm and his knuckles before fluttering his lips over the inside of his wrist. Vox’s other arm snaked carefully around his waist, holding Alastor against him securely and it suddenly occurred to Alastor that Vox had no expectations of him, that there was no rush for anything more than *this*.

Vox just wanted to be with him.

He sucked in a breath at the epiphany, heart thumping loudly in his chest as another part of him sewed itself back together again. Vox noticed the subtle change in his expression and tangled their fingers together, studying him for a long moment.

“Colour?”

Alastor blinked. “Green.” He snuggled deeper into Vox’s side. “Green.”

Vox smiled and leaned his head delicately against Alastor’s as he caressed Alastor’s knuckles with a thumb. He said nothing and warm contentment curled in Alastor’s stomach.

“I love you,” Alastor whispered after a few minutes. “More than I ever loved Harriet. I thought the pain of losing her was insurmountable, but losing you... I couldn’t *breathe*. It was like hacking off my own limbs. I’ve never felt so... empty. Alone. Some days I couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep... and I’d see your face on a billboard or a flyer and the agony would flare all over again, like I was being eaten away from the inside out.”

Vox squeezed his hand and tugged him a fraction closer. “Eventually the tears dried up and I just became... numb. To everything. Bitter and lonely and touch-starved to the point where I *wanted* people to hurt me just so I’d *feel* something, just so someone would touch me. I worked myself into such a state of exhaustion that some nights I’d be glitching so often that I’d crash - for *hours*. Sometimes, Velvette would catch me before it got too bad, but often I’d ignore her anyway, because if I crashed, I wouldn’t have to think about how shitty everything was.” He frowned. “And then there were the nights I holed myself up in my room and watched reruns of shows where we teased each other over the phones. The early days of our friendship. And I- I’d-”

Vox’s voice cracked and Alastor wrapped his arms around him tightly and nuzzled into his neck. “I tuned into your shows sometimes,” he admitted. “Merely to hear your voice.”

Vox laughed weakly even as a tear dripped off the bottom of his screen. “Fuck, we’re pathetic.”

Alastor pressed a dotting kiss to Vox’s neck. “I think we missed each other.”

Vox shifted and suddenly pulled Alastor against his chest, pressing his screen into his hair as he squeezed Alastor tightly. When he released Alastor, he barked out a laugh.

“I built an entire fucking fortress to keep you out, and you just... appeared in my office with a grin and I *barely* reacted. Why the fuck did I spend so much money on security that doesn’t work, protecting myself against a guy I *wanted* to see?”

Alastor’s smile widened and he flicked an antennae. “Because, my dear, you have more money than sense.”

“You must have studied my security a little. Or at least V-Tower. No way you just... waltzed in without a little research.”

“Hm... I may have stolen some blueprints from city planning.”

“Ha! I knew it!”

“The lengths I’ll go to see you...”

Vox squeezed him affectionately and Alastor closed his eyes with a contented sigh and enjoyed the tender moment with his favourite picture box.

Vox spent the next four days with Alastor at the hotel and Alastor was almost amused by the Television Demon’s protectiveness.

He fit in surprisingly well with the hotel residents and it was the most relaxed Alastor had seen him in years. Of course, Angel and Husk had seen Valentino’s post and they subtly asked him about it, but before Alastor had a chance to stumble through a lie, Vox cut in smoothly that he and Valentino were fighting about how much time Vox spent with Alastor, and that the post had been made to encourage Alastor to cut contact with Vox. Alastor quickly chimed in that he was above such pettiness and that he wouldn’t cut contact with Vox over a lie Valentino had spun out of jealousy.

This led to Angel quietly asking if there was anything going on between Vox and Alastor and whilst Vox had hesitated, Alastor had placed a hand on Vox’s shoulder and smiled smugly and Vox had immediately brightened, giving Angel the answer he needed.

So, rumour number two was well on its way around Hell.

And thus started the *touches*.

Subtle and affectionate and *comfortable*, as though it was completely normal for Vox to put a hand on Alastor's back when he was reading something over his shoulder. As though Vox touching the inside of Alastor's wrist when he wanted attention was something he had always done. As though squeezing Alastor's knee whenever Vox laughed was a common sight. As though stroking Alastor's ears whenever they chatted over a glass of rye was an appropriate thing to do in the hotel bar.

And the worst thing about it? Alastor *liked* it.

He found himself reciprocating the touches too. He would straighten Vox's suit in the morning, regardless of whether anything was out of place or not. He would caress Vox's antennae whenever they were in deep conversation. He would massage Vox's palm whenever they were speaking to someone else, working years' worth of knots and cramp out of his hands. He would touch Vox's waist with a smile whenever the Television Demon got excited about something.

It was surprising how quickly they had once again grown comfortable around each other, even after so many decades of pain. There was a lot of trauma there, but Alastor could *feel* himself healing with every minute he spent beside Vox. He could feel his smile softening, his eyes brightening, his tail starting to wiggle every time he set his gaze on Vox. It was *wonderful*.

He knew it couldn't last. He knew Vox would eventually return to Valentino, that he had to *share*. He knew Vox was torn between the two of them, that he couldn't avoid his business partners forever. He knew Valentino would guilt Vox into returning to him, into believing that he was unworthy of affection. He could only hope that Vox would slink back to the hotel and let Alastor love him and build him back up again.

If this was all he could have with Vox, then he would take it and hope that Vox would one day have the strength to leave Valentino of his own will. Alastor would take care of him in the meantime, in between Valentino's *abuse*.

On the fifth incredible morning of waking up in Vox's arms, head on his chest and his own arms slung around Vox, Alastor stretched and noticed Vox was scrolling through his phone. Alastor watched him for a little while and Vox rubbed his back with his spare hand, letting Alastor know Vox had noticed he was awake.

Alastor slid a hand under Vox's shirt and curled his fingers around his ribs possessively, rubbing his thumb over one. Vox smiled and pressed a slow kiss to the top of his head before returning his gaze to his phone and Alastor settled onto his chest with a happy sigh as he continued to study his beloved picture box.

"Emergency Overlord meeting this afternoon," Vox murmured. "Velvette's offered to go on behalf of the Vees."

Alastor pulled a face and Vox chuckled. "Don't want to go?"

"They're so *dull*."

Vox put his phone face-down on the bed and toyed with one of Alastor's ears. "I could come with you? Pull faces at you from across the table? Tune into a local station and let you watch a movie on my head?"

Alastor snickered. "Imagine Carmilla's disapproval."

"Rosie would enjoy a good old-fashioned musical. Zestial too, probably."

"You're a rebellious little thing, aren't you?" purred Alastor, delighted. This truly was the Vox he remembered.

"I'm a shit-stirrer." Vox grinned. "Learned it from you."

Alastor laughed and slid more comfortably on top of Vox to share a sweet kiss with him. Vox held him tightly, gaze filled with warmth.

“I love this,” he whispered, smiling as he pulsed adoring, playful static into Alastor. “I love how easy this is. I love that you let me hold you and kiss you. You’re doing so well. You’ve come so far, Al. I’m so proud of you.”

Heat blossomed across Alastor’s cheeks as he was taken off-guard by the sincerity in Vox’s tone.

“Vox, there are so many things I can’t give you-”

“And there’s so much that you can,” Vox interrupted gently. “Like this. I’ve never had this before - even on Earth. I never thought anyone would want to give me this.” His hand slid to Alastor’s cheek. “Stop worrying about what you aren’t ready for or what you can’t give. I’m *happy*, Al. I really am. I want you to be happy too. Tell me how to make you happy.”

Alastor’s mouth grew a little dry and he struggled for words for a moment before he propped his chin on Vox’s chest. “I *am* happy, my love. You make me so.”

Vox traced his fingers along Alastor’s jaw. “Sap.”

Alastor snorted and kissed Vox’s palm. “You’re the one monologuing.” He blinked slowly, like a contented cat. “What do you think the big emergency is?”

“Exterminations? New big Overlord? Another truly evil human has died and we have to lock them away to protect the public? Taxes are increasing?” He paused and his eyes lit up. “Oh! First evil dog has arrived in Hell?”

“If you want a dog, hire a hellhound.”

“They’re *people*. ”

“They still enjoy ear rubs.”

“So do you,” Vox teased as he scratched behind Alastor’s ear.

Alastor huffed and leaned into his touch anyway.

“I think I’ll come to the meeting with you,” Vox said softly and Alastor cracked an eye open, wondering when he had closed them.

“Even though Velvette is going?”

“I like being with you,” Vox murmured as he trailed his fingers down Alastor’s jaw again. “I want to be with you, even if I’m sitting across the table from you.”

Alastor’s ears perked up as his heart fluttered wildly in his chest. Damn, he loved this man.

He cuddled into Vox and relished being petted by his Television Demon.

Alastor let Vox’s words wash over him as they strolled down to the usual meeting place, Vox’s arm snaking loosely around his waist as he chattered enthusiastically about humans’ latest advancements in AI. Alastor studied his face as he gesticulated wildly with his spare hand and he felt his own smile growing wider as he was struck by a sense of nostalgia. Vox looked so *comfortable*...

His gaze softened with fondness as Vox’s static prickled his skin excitedly as he grew more and more passionate about the topic of AI and how he could apply it to some of his own

technology, and Alastor didn't understand half of what Vox was explaining, but he nodded anyway and made interested sounds in all the right places, and he brushed his fingers over Vox's lower back in encouragement, pleased to see Vox so... happy.

Eventually, Vox figured out that Alastor had lost track of the conversation and his screen tinged red, making Alastor chuckle.

"Sorry," Vox murmured. "Didn't mean to bore you." He rubbed the back of his neck and Alastor traced patterns over his waist.

"You didn't. Continue. I've missed your enthusiasm."

Vox's screen burned redder and Alastor's smile widened when Vox slowly restarted his enthusiastic one-sided discussion. He could listen to Vox talk like this all day...

It didn't escape his notice that sinners were watching them. Some leered at Alastor and others took pictures of him and Vox together. One ballsy sinner made the mistake of getting a little too close to Alastor, gaze predatory, and Vox sent a thousand volts racing into him before Alastor commanded his shadows to throw the idiot into a nearby wall.

He was grateful for Vox's support and he was extremely pleased about Vox's arm around his waist - how easy and natural it had been for Vox to stake his claim for all to see. Let the rumours fly!

Let them reach Valentino. Let Valentino *seethe* about Alastor stealing Vox's attention back. Let Valentino know that despite his vicious attempt at humiliation, Alastor still held the keys to Vox's heart. Alastor would heal the damage he had dealt Vox and then he would heal the damage Valentino had inflicted too, because Vox had always been, and would always be, *his*.

And unlike Valentino, Alastor would be *faithful*. He would adore and dote on his picturebox in every possible way, until Vox knew he was worthy of love, until Vox knew how beautiful he was.

A sinner made a phallic gesture at Alastor and Alastor's shadows wrapped around his ankle and dragged him quickly through the streets until he passed out from screaming.

Vox squeezed his hip affectionately and Alastor smirked. He appreciated Vox's support immensely. He appreciated the blatant show of solidarity. He appreciated how relaxed Vox's arm was where it wound around his waist - not too tight to suggest overprotectiveness or to imply some sort of *weakness* on Alastor's part, but not too loose to suggest that Vox didn't particularly care either.

Everything about Vox's posture was carefully planned - from the way his body was turned slightly towards Alastor to the way his thumb gently caressed Alastor's hip as they walked. Vox *wanted* everyone to know that he was smitten with the Radio Demon, that Alastor was *his*. Alastor was more than happy to put on a show and he traced his fingers slowly over Vox's back to prove that Vox's affections weren't one-sided, that he saw Vox as his equal despite their previous fights.

Amongst the leers and hungry smirks, there were quiet murmurs and excitable whispers and it occurred to Alastor that Vox was cleverly shifting attention from the rumours of Alastor's rape to the clear evidence of the end to his and Vox's decades-long rivalry and the start of something rather unexpected.

The further they walked, the more pictures were snapped of them and Alastor bit back a delighted laugh when Vox suddenly paused his prattling to kiss his cheek and give him a gooey look. A dozen phones flashed at them followed by a flurry of dings and buzzes and rapid texting, and the corner of Vox's mouth pulled ever so slightly into a wicked smirk as he winked at Alastor and continued their journey.

Alastor's heart thumped loudly in his chest and his tail wiggled beneath his clothes.

No mistaking what was going on between them now.

Soon, discussions of Valentino's video would be replaced by his and Vox's scandalous affair. Alastor hoped it would eat at Valentino's chest. He hoped Valentino would regret taking Vox for granted. He hoped Valentino would burn with shame over the abuse he had dealt Vox.

They made their way down the corridor that led to the meeting room, Vox's arm still draped around Alastor, and a thrill shot up Alastor's spine at Vox's obvious plan to show Velvete and Rosie (and the other Overlords) that they were once again a team.

Vox squeezed his hip in query as they approached the doors to the board room.

Alastor splayed his hand possessively over Vox's lower back.

Vox beamed before pushing through the doors.

They both faltered at the sight of Valentino lounging smugly in one of the chairs; a gap between him and an annoyed Velvete - a gap that was clearly intended for Vox.

Valentino caught sight of Vox's arm around Alastor's waist and his smile fell into a look of anger. Velvete glanced over at their entrance and her eyes widened before she quickly shifted her wary gaze to Valentino.

Alastor's heart sank but he smiled lazily and patted Vox's back and took his usual seat opposite the Vees and beside a narrow-eyed Rosie, who looked like she might eat Valentino at any moment.

The rest of the room was silent as attention subtly shifted to Vox, who still hovered by the door.

Alastor averted his gaze, staring instead at whatever presentation Carmilla had cooked up for them. He had no intention of making Vox feel guilty over choosing to sit with the Vees. They were his business partners, so it was only right that he sat between them, even if it infuriated Alastor to have to watch Valentino drape himself all over Vox with a satisfied smirk, touching Vox despite expressing his disgust not too long ago, manipulating Vox all over again, dragging him in and pulling him beneath the waves, drowning him in guilt and humiliation and chipping away at his self-confidence until there was nothing left, until Vox was a self-loathing, shaking wreck who didn't have the strength to leave his abuser even though he knew that their relationship was *toxic* - and Alastor couldn't even interfere because he needed Vox to *choose* to leave like Rosie had said-

The chair beside him squeaked against the floor.

Alastor turned to watch Vox slide into it, gaze narrowed at Valentino as he pointedly threw his arm over the back of Alastor's chair.

Valentino looked as though he'd been slapped across the face with a brick. Alastor's heart skipped a beat as he glanced between the two. On his other side, Rosie's breath hitched in excitement.

Suddenly, Valentino clenched his fists and bared his teeth at Vox.

"Vox," he warned quietly.

Vox rubbed his thumb in slow circles over Alastor's shoulder. "Val," he replied coolly.

Velvette grinned and carefully slid her phone out of her pocket, aiming the lens between Vox and Valentino as she tried to keep the rest of the device hidden beneath the table.

"Get over here," Valentino growled.

"I can sit wherever I like," Vox said dismissively.

"We're your business partners," Valentino said lowly. "Don't you have any sense of *loyalty*?"

A laugh escaped Rosie and Valentino bared his teeth at her instead. "Something funny, bitch?"

Electricity crackled over Vox's frame as Alastor's silhouette leapt onto the wall behind with a menacing grin. Rosie put a delicate hand out and they barely managed to restrain themselves from attacking Valentino.

Rosie smiled sweetly. "Sweetheart, you're the last person who should be preaching about loyalty. You've got enough notches in your bed posts to qualify as a termite infestation."

Velvette bit back a snicker and Alastor eyed Rosie in delight as Vox outright snorted.

Valentino blinked at her, mouth opening and closing for a moment before he growled at her and whipped his gaze to Vox instead. "Get the fuck over here!"

Alastor nearly lost his breath when Vox very pointedly tangled their fingers together and set their linked hands on the table for Valentino to see.

Valentino sprung to his feet, wings flared in fury. "The only reason that *bastard* is paying you attention is because he's a fucking coward who needs protection now that everyone knows he's rapeable!"

In less than a second, Vox had Valentino pinned to the floor, the lights dimming as he snarled bloody murder at the writhing, screaming moth, violet skin burning under the intensity of Vox's electricity.

"Vox!" Velvette cried, phone forgotten as she raced towards the pair to separate them, and Alastor launched across the table and dragged her back before she could attempt to touch Vox.

"Get off me!" Velvette snarled, but Alastor shook his head quickly.

"He'll burn you too if you touch him," Alastor said as he nodded to the blue bolts of charge dancing and flashing across Vox's body.

Velvette stared at the pair in horror. “Vox! Stop!”

Vox paused his attack and Valentino slashed his claws through Vox’s chest. Vox hissed and leapt off him.

“Freak!” Valentino snarled, tears in his eyes as he crawled away from Vox, wincing at every movement with his newly burned skin. His arms trembled and he slipped, back crashing against the floor. He managed to prop himself up again.

“He’ll leave,” Valentino hissed at Vox. “Like he always does. And this time, I won’t be there to pick up the pieces. I’ll watch you fucking *suffer*. I could have given you *everything*, but you’re so fucking obsessed with him that you couldn’t see it. You treated me like shit! Well, good luck trying to fuck your doe! Prey *always* runs.” He grinned ferally. “And he’ll definitely run when he sees the ugly shit under your clothes.”

Alastor’s silhouette had been slowly creeping along the walls, edging closer to Valentino, and now it pounced on him with a vicious smirk, raking its claws through his wings until Valentino howled. It slithered back to Alastor, looking very pleased with itself.

Vox smiled coldly. “Turns out he didn’t run.”

Valentino blinked in confusion before his eyes widened and he flicked his gaze to Alastor for a moment before returning to Vox, antennae drooping at the implications.

Vox’s smile widened and he crouched so that he was on eye-level with the moth-demon. “He fucking *worshipped* me,” he whispered so quietly that Alastor had to strain to hear him.

Heat crept up Alastor’s neck.

“He took his time,” Vox continued ever-so-quietly as Valentino’s antennae folded lower and lower. “He called me beautiful and he fucking meant it. He thinks I’m strong. He likes my mechanical parts as much as my biological parts. He *wants* to touch me.” He glared at Valentino in disdain. “Why *the fuck* would I ever want a monster like you when I have all of that?”

“You turned me into this,” Valentino whispered, equally as quiet and with as much disgust. “I wasn’t like this before I met you.”

“Don’t blame me for your shitty choices,” growled Vox before he stood. “I’m not the one abusing my staff and filming rape scenes.”

“But you do air them,” snarled Valentino.

“Not anymore. You can either film something else, or get out of my fucking tower.”

Alastor’s ears pricked up and he raised his eyebrows at Vox, chest filling with pride.

“We have a contract!”

“So what? It isn’t soul binding. Change production or quit. They’re your options,” Vox grumbled and he snagged Alastor’s hand and led him around the table, back to their seats. “We’ll talk about the little social media stunt you pulled when this meeting is over. You’re a liability to the company reputation.” He took a seat, keeping his hand firmly linked with Alastor’s. “Get the fuck out of my sight.”

Valentino stared at him for a long moment before struggling to his feet. He glowered at Vox, using the wall to support himself.

“Big talk for two men on chains.”

Vox and Alastor stiffened as murmurs rippled amongst the other Overlords.

“Get the fuck out, Valentino!” Velvette snapped and when he smirked at the seething Vox, she steered him out of the board room, ignoring his hisses and winces of pain.

The door slammed shut and silence fell over the room.

“Well,” said Carmilla slowly. “You Vees certainly are masters of entertainment. Let’s begin, shall we?”

Chapter End Notes

Warning: In the third section, there is a brief discussion of Alastor's rape, but nothing graphic.

Sorry for the long wait guys, my hamster, Charlie, died and I've been too sad to write (he was old and thankfully not ill, but he was an affectionate little guy who used to run around my legs and jump onto my keyboard every night whilst I was writing this fic, so I've really felt the loss).

Anyway, here's a long chapter to make up for it, with a bit of comeuppance for Val :)

Chapter 45: Dancing In The Moonlight

Chapter Notes

Warning at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

They crept out of the bar, snickering as they clutched a bottle of brandy and two glasses between them. A whisky tumbler grazed Alastor's ear and shattered against the door and Vox managed to duck below a flying beer bottle before it smashed through his screen.

The doors swung shut behind them, dulling the sounds of the fighting inside.

They cackled as they trotted away from the bar and Vox poured them both a celebratory drink as they walked.

"My good man, you are a picture of elegance even when you're beating creeps to a bloody pulp. How did you do that without even looking at the guy?" Vox asked as he passed Alastor his glass.

Alastor sipped delicately at the brandy, smirking. "You are more than a pretty face, my love," he purred, as pleasantly buzzed as Vox was himself. Vox's heart fluttered at the endearment and his smile widened when Alastor drew a finger beneath his screen. "I could see his reflection in your screen."

Vox sipped at his brandy before sliding an arm around Alastor and tugging him into his side. Alastor came easily, blinking like a contented cat as they walked towards the canal.

"You seem very pleased about starting a bar fight," Vox teased.

“Au contraire, my dear fellow! You started the bar fight when you tripped the brainless fool and pushed him into the next table. I’m merely pleased about the free brandy!”

“He was coming at you with a broken beer bottle,” Vox drawled. “It isn’t safe to run with glass - I was only trying to slow him down.”

“Fair point! Perhaps if he hadn’t been so careless, he wouldn’t have impaled his fellow patron and thus been concussed by an entire bottle of gin,” Alastor said and Vox raised his glass in agreement.

“Exactly. I mean, I’m hardly to blame for the resulting fight! Sinners are always looking for an excuse to brawl. I only threw a *couple* of glasses.”

Alastor’s smile widened. “Right you are, old chum! What’s a couple of glasses between friends? I, myself, only stabbed a *couple* of patrons!”

“Self defense!” Vox chirped as he clinked his glass against Alastor’s and curled his fingers possessively around Alastor’s hip. “And I only killed the sleazeball that thought he could run his filthy mouth at you, so that counts as defending your honour.”

“My hero,” purred Alastor as he suddenly shoved his head beneath Vox’s screen, being careful not to graze him with his antlers.

Vox’s eyes fluttered shut at what was clearly a claim. He pulsed encouraging static into Alastor’s hip, frequency easily sliding into harmony with Alastor’s own.

A few of his partners had tried to stake a claim on him in the past - including Valentino - but he had always felt uncomfortable at the little shows of possession, because it made him feel like an object, like a *thing* to be owned and used. His previous partners had marked him with bites and bruises and sometimes even burns, and it always *hurt*, and it always felt as though he was being dominated; treated like something less than a person.

But that wasn't the case with Alastor. No, when Alastor made his claim, he smirked in satisfaction and made a show of touching Vox affectionately; Alastor held him close and Vox felt *adored* rather than owned, *cherished* rather than dehumanised. It felt as though Alastor was proving to all of Hell that he was the only one with the rights to Vox's heart, that he was *privileged* to have Vox's attention whenever he requested it. Alastor made him feel worthy and proud of being claimed, rather than humiliated by it.

The liquor was clearly affecting Alastor's courage and playfulness, because he suddenly whirled around and buried his face into Vox's neck as he wound an arm around Vox's waist and somehow didn't manage to spill a single drop of brandy. He mouthed at Vox's neck and Vox melted against him, peppering kisses over his ears, and Alastor's static skittered teasingly over his skin before he abruptly peeled himself off Vox and looped their arms together, restarting their journey.

Vox's heart hammered in his chest as he gazed adoringly at his Radio Demon. Alastor's spontaneous bursts of affection were unlike anything he had ever experienced before. They made him feel loved and needed and appreciated, and Vox was fairly certain that was the whole point, but it never felt forced or out of place and Vox could only hope that Alastor knew how grateful he was. *Decades* of self-loathing and shame and disgust at himself were being dismantled with every kiss and caress and cuddle and comment of praise from Alastor.

When he was with Alastor, he didn't feel so embarrassed of his body. Alastor *liked* how he looked.

He smiled softly at Alastor as the Radio Demon commented upon the patrons at the bar as though he hadn't just draped himself all over Vox in public, and he punctuated his statements with his brandy glass, somehow still managing to keep every drop of liquid inside it.

They made their way down to the canal side, sticking to the illuminated path and ignoring what lurked in the shadows of the night, and conversation turned to the reason for their celebratory drinks: the end of Valentino's foul and violent pornography.

He was still shooting videos, but the actors were willing and those that weren't starred in more tasteful films, or shot solo acts.

Ratings were down but Vox didn't care because he refused to air cheap, unconsenting *filth* any longer. Valentino wasn't speaking to him either, but Vox figured it wasn't a big loss. Let him sulk and lick his burns and keep their relationship strictly professional.

Excitement raced through Vox's spine as he glanced at Alastor. He had more important things to focus on than Valentino.

"You should stay at V-Tower tonight," Vox said suddenly as he squeezed Alastor's hip. "We're always at the hotel - why don't you stay in my room tonight?"

Alastor arched an eyebrow at him and Vox's screen tinted pink. "I want you to feel comfortable in my home too. I want you to feel like you can drop by anytime. You're always welcome."

Alastor's gaze was bright with amusement. "And what about Valentino? Won't he be a little... irked by my presence?"

"I can invite anyone I like over," said Vox firmly as he raised his glass. "Fuck him!"

Alastor's grin widened. "Something you won't be doing any longer!" He knocked their glasses together and took another drink as Vox laughed in delight and threw back the rest of his brandy.

Alastor's ears twitched and Vox immediately raised a hand to one, massaging its base and smiling fondly when Alastor leaned into his touch for a moment before swivelling towards whatever he had heard. His ears stood erect and the last few brandies settled warmly in Vox's stomach, bathing his mind in a soothing cloud of contentment.

He slid behind Alastor, dissolving the glass and brandy bottle out of existence, and snaked his arms around Alastor's middle. Alastor tensed for a brief moment before Vox nuzzled into his hair and pulsed reassuring static between them, and he quickly relaxed, letting Vox hold him as he listened.

Alastor smelled of woodlands and whisky and fresh rain. There was a hint of musk there too and Vox pulled him closer, pressing himself flush against Alastor's back in an attempt to draw in as much of Alastor's scent through his vents as possible, since that was how his sense of smell functioned.

Alastor's hair shone under the dim orange glow of the street lights, tips of his antlers glinting dangerously, and his ears flicked and twitched as he focused on whatever had caught his attention.

Vox splayed a hand over Alastor's stomach and another over his chest and he kissed the back of his neck, long and slow.

"You are so fucking gorgeous," Vox whispered into the back of his neck.

Alastor's glass dissolved in a tangle of shadows and he slid his hands along Vox's arms, intertwining their fingers together and tipping his head forwards so Vox had more access to his neck.

Vox pressed a deep kiss to the back of his neck. "Smell so good."

"I smell like an animal," Alastor murmured, tone edging on distaste. "And alcohol."

Vox shook his head and squeezed Alastor gently. "You smell of forest rain and spiced rye. You smell sweet and earthy, but you also smell faintly of musk, of *beast*, and I'm fucking addicted to it. I grew up in a city where those things didn't exist, but you... *Damn*. You smell *incredible*. I can't get enough of you."

He heard Alastor swallow before he pressed back against Vox and his eyes fluttered shut. Vox mantled himself around his Radio Demon.

"And you're *mine*," he growled into Alastor's ear, nuzzling at it when it twitched towards him. "After seventy years of waiting, you're finally *mine*."

Alastor's smile widened a fraction. "My dear, what makes you think I can be *owned*?" he purred.

"What makes you think you have a choice?" Vox teased. "I've captured you now. You're my prisoner." He squeezed Alastor pointedly, earning a huff of amusement. "I'll take good care of you. Keep you entertained. I'll give you plenty of crayons."

Alastor snorted and Vox grinned from his shoulder and rubbed his thumb over Alastor's stomach.

"I'm afraid that simply isn't true," Alastor drawled. "You say I'm your prisoner but you've failed to notice that you are, in fact, my *pet*. You think you have my wrists bound but you didn't see me sliding a collar around your neck..." He hooked a finger under Vox's screen and Vox's eyes fluttered shut, relishing the teasing.

Suddenly, he gasped theatrically. "Insolence! Off to the canal with you!" He quickly swept Alastor off his feet, carrying him in a bridal hold, and Alastor yelped in alarm as Vox shuffled towards the edge of the canal.

"Vox!" Alastor said before an amused smile tugged at his mouth and he wriggled in Vox's secure grip. "Put me down, you foolish video podcast!"

"Treason!" Vox declared as he halted near the water's edge, wiggling his eyebrows at Alastor. "Any last words, old-timer?"

Alastor narrowed his eyes and dissolved in Vox's arms, appearing in the shadows a few feet away. He smirked and crooked a finger at Vox in challenge.

Charge raced over Vox's frame as he took to the lights and reappeared a few inches in front of Alastor, backlit by the streetlamp.

Alastor melted into the shadows once more and Vox chased him, and before the Radio Demon could vanish again, Vox caught him around the waist and trapped his spine against his chest.

He was taken off-guard when Alastor whirled around and kissed him heatedly, his hands clutching the back of Vox's coat.

They broke for air and Vox panted a little as he gazed adoringly at Alastor.

Alastor's ears stood tall and he raised his eyebrows before snickering and tapping just below his eye. "My, my... Is that a new feature?"

Vox blinked and realised his pupils had taken the shape of pink digital hearts. His fans whirled faster even as he smiled and shook his head. "That, uh... That happens sometimes. Mostly when I'm thinking about you." He frowned thoughtfully. "Actually, it's only ever happened when I'm thinking about you." He returned his pupils to their usual shape and colour.

Alastor looked a tad startled by the confession and he trailed a finger down the edge of Vox's screen.

A sauntering oboe caught his attention and his ears twisted once more as he listened. It was soft and backed by a small ensemble of brass and wind instruments. They were a little messy and the arrangement wasn't particularly well-planned, but the melody was clear and familiar.

Alastor took Vox's hand and led him into a tentative foxtrot and Vox nearly lost his breath as a wave of nostalgia crashed over him. He gripped Alastor's hand tightly and their steps were less certain than they had once been, their movements a little stilted as they tried to recall how they fit together, but their static wrapped around each other tenderly and their frequencies slotted into harmony, and *oh how Vox had missed this*.

Their moves were less flamboyant than they had been so long ago, missing the extravagant twists and dips and *drama*, but Vox still pressed closer and Alastor's gaze was brimming with adoration, and as they rolled into the second section, Vox startled at Alastor's quiet singing.

“The stars are aglow and tonight how their light sets me dreaming,” he murmured. *“My love, do you know that your eyes are like stars brightly beaming?”*

Vox’s heart thumped loudly in his chest. It had been decades since he had heard Alastor sing like this, with such gentleness and sincerity and intensity. His fans worked faster the longer Alastor sang to him and he melted against the Radio Demon, letting Alastor lead him along the side of the canal in a dance they had both wrongly assumed they had forgotten.

The song came to an end and they found themselves pressed against each other’s chests, breaths shaky and both of them feeling strangely nervous. They clutched at one another’s hand as they stared into each other’s eyes, and Vox’s spare hand curled protectively around the back of Alastor’s neck as Alastor splayed his fingers over Vox’s waist, holding him close.

Vox opened his mouth then closed it again, lost for words or perhaps too breathless to speak them. He focused on the rise and fall of Alastor’s chest against his and the humbled lowering of his ears and the way he gazed at Vox with such *utter devotion*...

He caught Alastor’s chin and kissed him hard and desperate and bursting with *grief* over so many wasted years.

Alastor responded eagerly, fisting his coat and squeezing his hand and lapping inside Vox’s mouth like he was *starving* for it, like he was trying to make up for the time they had lost.

Their tongues met and Vox released Alastor’s chin in favour of slinging an arm around his waist and Alastor sucked greedily at his tongue and his lips and Vox made a soft, needy sound at the back of his throat, wanting nothing more than for Alastor to *devour* him.

They parted for air briefly before chasing each other’s mouths once more and they released one another’s hands in favour of clinging to each other, desperate and urgent and *possessive*.

Alastor’s breaths were heavy and staggered as he growled against Vox’s mouth, filters thick in his voice. “You were never meant to be his. You were always supposed to be mine. Say it,

Vox. Say you're fucking *mine*. ”

“I’m yours,” Vox breathed as he nipped Alastor’s lower lip. “I’m fucking yours. I want to be yours. I need to be yours. I’ve *always* belonged to you, Alastor. I never stopped belonging to you, even when we were fighting, even when I was with him.”

Alastor tugged him in for another heated kiss and Vox sucked at his tongue.

“Never again,” Alastor hissed fiercely. “I’ll never let anyone take you from me again. I’ll never give you up again. You are mine and all of Hell will know it. I’ll never again be so careless as to lose something so precious.”

Vox shivered. “I want that,” he whimpered. “I want to be yours and I want you to be mine and I... I want us to take care of each other. I want us to protect each other and tease each other and trust each other like we used to. I want us to move past all the hurt and the pain and the *shit* we went through. I want... I want...”

He trembled, suddenly overwhelmed by his own emotions and Alastor captured his lips and explored every inch of his mouth as though Vox was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted.

“I’m yours, my love,” Alastor growled into his mouth. “I belong entirely to you. My heart is at your mercy and you may do with it whatever you please.”

“I’ll cherish it,” Vox murmured. “I’ll heal it and protect it and worship it for as long as you wish me to have it.”

Alastor’s frame shook. “Fuck,” he choked out and Vox tightened his grip on him and kissed him passionately.

Once their lips were bruised and swollen and spit-slicked, they parted with shaky breaths and held each other, letting the amateur ensemble’s slow music wash over them.

Alastor tucked his head into Vox's neck and Vox curled his fingers into silky red hair.

After a while, their gazes slid to the ensemble barely visible between the trees. They played in a small park illuminated by dim yellow fairy lights, and a group of sinners were cooking over an open grill, chatting and playing games. A few banners were slung between the trees and over a wooden picnic table, but neither Alastor nor Vox could make out what they said.

"I once possessed a photograph of the two of us beside this canal," Alastor murmured as he rubbed Vox's back idly. "Those same fairy lights were in the background." His ears lowered a fraction. "I don't know what happened to that picture. I used to keep it beside my bed but when I moved house all those years ago, I must have lost it. It was such a lovely photograph. I even returned to the house to see if I had dropped it, but I could never find it."

Vox listened quietly, carding his fingers through Alastor's hair before he froze and blinked as the epiphany struck him.

He leaned back slightly and slipped his hand into the inner pocket of his coat and retrieved the battered and torn picture of Alastor he kept there.

He unfolded the picture and Alastor watched him curiously before his eyes widened. He brushed delicate fingers over the worn, faded photo and looked up at Vox in query.

"I searched every room of that house, hoping I'd find you or a clue as to where you'd gone. When I got to your room, the photo was behind the door," Vox said. "I thought... I thought you'd tossed it. I thought you'd left it on purpose because you didn't want anything to do with me, so I took it and I kept it."

His gaze dropped to the torn photo and he rubbed his thumb across it. "After Val attacked you that day in the street, we got into a fight. We're always fighting about you. He got pissed and found the photo and... well..." He frowned, drawing his thumb over the jagged edge of the picture.

Silence fell between them for a long moment until Alastor licked his lips. “You kept it in your coat. After all these decades, after everything I did to you, after all of our fights... you kept it?”

Vox brushed a finger over the back of the slit in the centre of the photo, where a knife had split it. “Could never quite bring myself to throw it away, no matter how many times I tried to.”

Alastor fell quiet as he stared at Vox, ears low. When Vox finally met his gaze, Alastor slid a hand over Vox’s heart and kissed him gently on the lips. Vox’s eyes slipped shut and he gathered Alastor closer, smiling when Alastor snaked his arms into his coat and curled his fingers into the back of his shirt.

“I want to see you,” Alastor breathed against Vox’s lips. “I want to touch you.”

Vox’s heart raced and his chest tightened with a strange combination of anxiety and excitement. This was such a huge step for Alastor, for him to *ask* for something so intimate...

Slow and steady, thought Vox. *Make him feel safe.*

He pressed a kiss to Alastor’s temple. “You can have anything you want, Smiles.”

“You,” whispered Alastor. “I want *you*.” He pressed his chest flush with Vox’s and stole another kiss. “I’ll meet you in your room.”

He dissolved into the shadows, leaving Vox staring into space for a moment, stunned and excited and perhaps a little breathless. He phased into the lights and chased after his darling buck.

Alastor appeared in Vox's room with nerves rattling around his chest and his ears flicking restlessly.

He had been so overwhelmed by love at learning that Vox had kept the photo that he had wanted nothing more than to touch Vox, to *claim* him and worship him and *reward* him for his loyalty, but now he wasn't so certain he could. What if Vox wanted more than he could bring himself to give? What if he *disappointed* Vox? What if he froze up or was drowned by memories, or- or-

Vox appeared in front of him with a grin bursting with excitement and affection. "Fancy meeting you here," he teased.

Alastor's shoulders relaxed and his smile widened.

Vox would never ask for more than he could give.

"Lie down," Alastor ordered, gesturing to the bed.

"Bossy," Vox drawled even as he kicked off his shoes and sat. He didn't lie down though and when Alastor raised an eyebrow at him, Vox propped himself up on his hands and grinned cheekily.

Alastor's tail wiggled beneath his clothes. He had missed this playful side of the Television Demon.

He pushed at Vox's chest and made a sound of alarm when Vox suddenly snagged his belt loops and they both crashed onto the bed together. Alastor tensed but Vox held him tightly and rubbed his back.

"You're in control here, Al," he whispered into Alastor's ear, tone serious. "You don't do anything you don't want to, understand? You tell me if you're not comfortable."

Alastor relaxed and nodded, the tightness in his chest easing. He slid off Vox and let the other man reposition himself fully on the bed and Alastor raked his gaze over him for a moment before moving beside him. He eased Vox out of his tailcoat and folded it carefully, placing it on one of the bedside tables.

Vox chuckled and Alastor shot him a dry look and started on his bowtie, placing that neatly on top of the coat.

“Y’know, I really don’t care if you throw them across the room,” Vox said. “You don’t have to be so... careful. They’re just clothes.”

Alastor frowned and trailed gentle fingers over Vox’s waistcoat. “If you can’t trust me to treat your clothes with respect, how can you trust me to treat your body with respect?”

Vox’s smirk dimmed a little. “...Most people don’t think like that.”

Alastor slid Vox’s waistcoat off and folded it, touching the stripes almost reverently. “You have always taken pride in your suits - don’t think I haven’t noticed. There is never a crease or a thread out of place. I’ll treat your clothes the same way you do, my dear.”

Vox stared at him for a long while, swallowing when Alastor carefully slid his hat off his antennae and placed it delicately on the waistcoat. When Alastor began unbuttoning Vox’s shirt, a hand slipped under his coat and curled around his hip.

“Can I... Am I allowed...” Vox licked his lips and tried again. “Can I see you too? Or is that too much?”

Alastor hesitated and stared at Vox, considering the request carefully. He was *safe* with Vox. Vox would never push him for anything he didn’t want...

Alastor nodded slowly and shrugged his own coat off and removed his tie. When his fingers slid to his waistcoat, Vox caught his hands. “May I?”

Alastor blinked, anxiety stirring in his chest. He forced it down and nodded and Vox *beamed* before delicately undoing the buttons. He slid the waistcoat off and admired the red silk inside before folding it and placing it beside his own clothes.

Alastor swallowed, strangely uncertain, but Vox lifted a hand to his cheek with a soft smile and Alastor continued removing Vox’s shirt.

His skin was navy and opaque, lined with silver circuit tracks and pale scars. Instead of nipples he bore LED strips, bright and blue to match the outer lining of the vents at his ribs. Peeking out at his hips were the colourful lights that Alastor had explored not too long ago.

Alastor traced a finger over a wide scar at his shoulder.

“From one of our fights,” Vox whispered and Alastor’s gaze snapped to his face, ears low and eyes wide with distress.

Vox smiled and trailed a finger along his jaw. “I’ve come to like it. I’ve come to like all the ones that you caused. They remind me who I really belong to. Who I’ve always belonged to.”

Alastor frowned and leaned over to press his lips to the scar. Vox fell quiet as he watched.

“I don’t want you to associate my affection for you with pain,” Alastor said firmly as he pulled back and swept his thumb over the old wound. “I’m not Valentino.” His ears flattened as his gaze rolled over the scars littering Vox’s body. “These should never have existed. I’m sorry, Vox.”

Vox blinked, looking a little lost. “I like them. I like wearing your mark.”

“They were inflicted out of anger and frustration and despair,” Alastor said, grazing his fingers down a few more scars. “This isn’t love. Love doesn’t look like this. You should be angry with me.”

Vox shook his head and pointed to a set of three scars trailing from his ribs to his hip. “These are from Val when we weren’t fighting.” He smiled lop-sidedly. “A lot of my partners have left some sort of mark on me. You don’t have to be embarrassed, Al. I’m *proud* of them. I know we were fighting at the time, but we’re okay now and I want you to make more. Deep ones and shallow ones and short ones and long ones. I want you to mark me. I want to see you carve your affections into my skin. I want you to make more than Valentino did. I want-”

“Vox, stop.”

Vox’s smile fell and Alastor frowned at him worriedly.

“That isn’t love, my dear. It’s *possession*. It’s abuse. It’s mutilation and sadism. It’s your insecurities manipulating you into thinking that to be touched, you need to *hurt*.” Alastor caught Vox’s screen between a finger and thumb. “Love isn’t supposed to hurt.”

His heart ached when Vox began to tremble, charge jumping between his antennae. “No, I... I know that. Of course I know that. But... But I *like* wearing your scars. I... I like...”

Alastor rubbed his shoulder, thumb sweeping over the thick scar. “I’m sorry, Vox. I’m sorry for what I’ve done to you.”

Vox squeezed his eyes shut, a tear escaping him. “They hurt so fucking much,” he whimpered.

Alastor’s heart broke.

“They hurt more because it was *you*, ” Vox managed, shaking. “They were the end of our friendship. The end of *everything*.” He suddenly opened his eyes and glared at Alastor. “You

promised you'd never fucking hurt me! You promised I was safe with you! You lied. You fucking lied and you broke me and *every day* when I looked in the mirror, I was reminded of that!"

"I know," Alastor whispered, still rubbing Vox's shoulder as grief and anguish and self-loathing rolled around his stomach.

"And I couldn't even hate you for it!" Vox said, voice cracking. "Because I loved you so damn much! So I hurt you too and made you suffer because I wanted you to feel what I was feeling and I *know* you've got scars under that fucking shirt. I *know* you have because I remember making them and I'm such a piece of shit for it because I promised you that you would always be safe with me too, and I fucking broke that promise because I was angry!"

Distraught static prickled the air and Alastor nodded and squeezed Vox's shoulder. "I know."

Vox gritted his teeth before squeezing his eyes shut again. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I was just... I was so... You were..."

Alastor's hand slid to Vox's waist, arm slipping around him and tugging him closer. "Tell me," he whispered. "Let it out, Vox. Tell me how I made you feel."

Vox curled his fingers into Alastor's shirt and buried his face into his chest. "Betrayed. Humiliated. Worthless. Furious. Confused. Alone."

Alastor kissed an antenna. "You are beautiful, Vox. You are intelligent and strong and cunning, but you're also playful and you have the biggest heart of any sinner I've ever met. You feel far too much and you're damaged and you think of yourself as more machine than person. You've made countless mistakes, lashed out when you shouldn't have, convinced yourself that everyone sees you as some sort of monster..."

Alastor held him tighter as Vox tensed. "And I love you for all of it. I was cruel to you. I humiliated you, betrayed you, left you alone and confused, and I will never be able to make it up to you, but I'll get on my knees and ask for your forgiveness anyway because I'm selfish

and greedy and I want you. I want to try to rectify my mistakes, even if it takes the rest of eternity.”

He hooked a finger under Vox’s screen, forcing him to meet his gaze. “And you have every right to say *no*. You have every right to shout and scream at me. You have every right to abandon me like I abandoned you, but I hope you won’t, because I want to worship you and adore you and treat you the way you deserve to be treated, the way I *should* have treated you all those decades ago.”

Vox trembled, eyes wide, before he fumbled hastily with Alastor’s buttons and threw the shirt open so that Alastor’s body was revealed to him.

Alastor bore as many scars as Vox did, but his were all gained from fights rather than a mix of battles and lovers. Some were angry and deep, others were mere grazes from a weapon he hadn’t quite dodged in time. They trailed below his belt and into the ruff of fur at his chest and Vox traced one he had caused before sliding his arms around bare skin and pulling Alastor in for a desperate kiss.

Alastor startled as their bare chests pressed flush with one another, but Vox squeezed him tightly and pulsed anguished static between them.

“I love you,” Vox whimpered against his lips. “I want you to touch me. I want you to kiss me. I want you to *stay*. I want you to *want* to stay with me.” He nipped Alastor’s lip. “And I want to touch you too. I want to kiss you. I want to worship and adore you and treat you the way you deserve. The way *I* should have treated *you* all those decades ago.” He pulled back and trailed his fingers over a long scar that rode over Alastor’s pectoral muscle. “Instead of causing these.”

Alastor caught his hand and kissed his fingers, relaxing at Vox’s tenderness. He shrugged his shirt off, tossed it onto the floor, and suddenly straddled Vox.

Vox’s eyes widened, hands closing immediately around his bare waist, gentle and possessive.

Alastor leaned down and trailed kisses over each and every scar, fingers roaming over miles of blemished skin. He pressed his lips to the light strips that replaced Vox's nipples and his fingers slipped into Vox's vents, and Vox's head tumbled backwards as he stifled a noise of pleasure.

Alastor's tongue smoothed over the other strip. "Touch me, Vox. You're allowed to."

Immediately, Vox's hands were all over him, tangling into the fur on his chest, brushing over the scars on his stomach before sweeping over his back and down his arms.

Alastor touched a familiar light at Vox's hip and Vox froze as his skin became transparent, but he didn't have time to overthink anything since Alastor's mouth was on him again, pressing wet kisses above his heart as one hand traced the path of his digestive system and the other sank further into his vents.

"Shit," Vox panted before his fingers dipped below Alastor's waistband and freed his tail.

The tail wiggled for Vox's amusement and Vox toyed with it as his other hand swept up Alastor's side, thumb brushing a nipple.

Alastor hesitated for a fraction of a second before shifting to lap at Vox's LED strips again.

Vox caught his nipple between a finger and thumb, pinching gently.

"Yellow," Alastor muttered with a frown and Vox immediately moved his hand to Alastor's back, rubbing in silent apology.

Alastor pushed his tail further into Vox's palm to show he was forgiven.

Alastor peppered kisses down Vox's chest to his stomach, trailing his tongue over another scar he remembered causing. Vox's skin tasted of copper and ozone and salt. He tasted *clean*.

Cleaner than anything in Hell had any right to be.

He slipped his fingers deeper into Vox's vents, brushing some of the filters inside as his other hand traced silver circuit tracks.

"Fuck," moaned Vox and Alastor paused when he noticed the hard bulge pressing into his bare stomach.

Unease settled in his gut.

He startled when Vox dragged him up the bed and rolled him onto his back before straddling him and attacking his chest with kisses. He buried his screen into the ruff of fur there and Alastor forced himself to breathe and relax.

Vox kissed him on the lips, hard and messy, lapping into Alastor's mouth hungrily, and he curled possessive fingers around Alastor's hip as he traced the scars at his stomach.

Alastor wrapped an arm around Vox, circling the ports at his spine as he curled his fingers inside Vox's vents. He sent a low, continuous stream of static into the vent and Vox sucked on his tongue and ground his hips into Alastor's.

Alastor froze, eyes snapping open at the feeling of Vox's hard cock against his and to his horror, his own cock had taken interest in present events and *oh shit*, what if Vox took that as permission to fuck him? What if Vox ripped his trousers off right now and forced Alastor onto his knees and rammed into him over and over until he was bruised and bloody and sobbing and-

Vox's hand slid from his stomach to his tail, teasing, tugging, fingertips slipping just below his belt to reach the tail base-

"Please! Please stop!"

His belt cut into his skin as a meaty hand forced his trousers lower. "Shut the fuck up!" His face was pushed into the dirt as two fingers forced into his ass, jerking painfully inside him.

"Yeah, you like that, you whiny little cocksucker? Fuck, you're so tight. Get his belt off. I want to see him take my dick."

"No!" Alastor struggled desperately, kicking out at whoever he could reach. Someone grunted and he was rewarded with a boot to the face for his efforts. He whimpered as his belt was removed.

"One of you fuck his mouth to shut him up. His ass is mine."

"Alastor! Alastor! Oh shit. Oh shit, shit, shit! Alastor, sweetheart, come back to me. Come on, Smiles. You're safe. I promise you're safe. Fuck! Come on, look at me, Al. Please."

Alastor forced his eyes open and realised that his skin was slicked with sweat and that his whole body was shaking violently, fingers clutching the sheets so tightly they were on the verge of tearing. The next thing he noticed was Vox hanging above him, looking a combination of terrified, ashamed, and as though he was about to crash.

When his face glitched for the fifth time in as many seconds, Alastor opened his mouth, closed it again, then finally croaked out *"Red."* His voice was thick with static.

Vox scrambled off him, charge racing up and down his frame and giving off sparks with his mounting stress. "Yeah, no shit!" he snapped, lifting a hand to his head as his screen glitched and distorted.

Alastor's gaze rolled to the ceiling, body tremoring and muscles locked. He couldn't *breathe*.

“Fuck,” Vox whispered again before he crawled back onto the bed and reached for Alastor then hesitated and stared helplessly at him. “What do I do? Al? Tell me how to help.”

Alastor squeezed his eyes shut, trying to will the memory away, but the darkness behind his eyelids allowed the images to form more clearly and the echoes of his own cries sounded between his ears.

He opened his eyes quickly.

“You’re safe,” Vox said quietly. “You’re in my room in V-Tower. No one is going to touch you. No one is going to hurt you. I won’t let them. I promise I won’t let anyone touch you, Al.”

Alastor’s gaze slid to Vox.

“Breathe, sweetheart. Relax. It was just a memory. It was my fault and I’m sorry, but I *promise* I wasn’t trying to push you into anything. I was just enjoying myself and I thought you were too. I should have been more careful. I should have been paying more attention.”

Alastor’s breaths slowed, muscles loosening.

“I’m sorry, Al. I’m so fucking sorry,” Vox whimpered. “I should have *noticed*-”

“You did,” Alastor managed. “You did notice and you stopped. You stopped before I even asked you to.”

Vox stiffened. “Of course I stopped before you asked me to! You only asked me to stop *after* it was too late!”

Alastor slowly propped himself against the headboard. “I panicked. I couldn’t think. I wasn’t even aware it was *you*, Vox. I *couldn’t* ask you to stop.” He rubbed his eyes tiredly. “But you

still stopped. Thank you.”

Vox slumped beside him, back hitting the headboard. “I’m so sorry,” he said miserably. “I pushed too far.”

Alastor leaned against Vox’s shoulder. “I enjoyed it until then,” he offered quietly. “Some actions trigger memories and it’s extremely frustrating and *useless* and-” He cut himself off with a scowl. “I was enjoying myself, my dear. I promise you.”

“...Can I hold you?”

Alastor nodded but when Vox slipped his arm around his waist, the bare skin on skin contact startled Alastor and he tensed again.

Vox retracted his arm.

“I’m sorry,” Alastor said, frustrated at himself.

Vox’s warmth left his side and icy dread settled in Alastor’s gut. Vox was leaving him. Vox was annoyed with him. *Disappointed* in him.

A pair of navy silk pyjamas landed on his lap and he stared at them in confusion. He glanced over at Vox to find the Television Demon slipping on a set of black pyjamas.

“Put them on and get into bed and let’s see if I can spoon you.”

Alastor’s ears perked upright. “...Spoon me?”

Vox nodded and turned around, giving Alastor some privacy to change. Alastor did so and Vox climbed under the covers with him, carefully wrapping himself around Alastor's back.

Alastor melted into him with a sigh of relief. "I am sorry, Vox."

Vox nuzzled into his hair. "Hush. You've nothing to be sorry about. Relax."

Alastor stared at the window and the stars twinkling in the night sky.

"You suit blue," Vox commented into his hair.

A smile pulled at Alastor's lips as his chest filled with warmth and affection. "Thank you, Vox."

Silence stretched between them for a little while.

"I'm so damn proud of you," Vox whispered. "You did so well."

Heat crept to Alastor's cheeks. "...I... I lost myself."

"You were perfect until then. You were confident and gorgeous and you told me exactly what you wanted. I'm proud of you. That was a huge step."

Alastor mused over his words before slotting his fingers between Vox's and slowly sliding them beneath his shirt, until Vox's palms settled over his bare stomach and the fur at his chest. Vox inhaled sharply and tugged him closer. *Protective.*

"You're so fucking incredible," Vox breathed and he kissed the back of Alastor's neck and curled more securely around him.

Alastor smiled and snuggled back against Vox with a contented sigh.

He was safe.

Vox would take care of him.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: In the second section there is a small part in italics where Alastor has a rape memory.

Thank you everyone for your kind condolences in the last chapter. Song in this chapter is 'Moonlight Serenade' by Frank Sinatra.

It's going so well for Al and Vox, isn't it? Almost too well... :3

Chapter 46: Little Boxes Of Happiness

Chapter Notes

Warning at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

He awoke slowly to Vox's low, rumbling tones. There was an arm curled tightly around him and they appeared to have shifted during the night, with Alastor's head now resting on Vox's chest as he curled into the Television Demon's comforting warmth.

He had been sleeping very well recently - better than he had in, well, *ever*; and he assumed it was because he felt so at ease when Vox slept beside him or around him or sprawled half on top of him or however else they tended to wake up.

He nuzzled into Vox's chest, squeezing his middle affectionately and Vox's arm tightened around him. He continued speaking and Alastor stretched lazily, keeping quiet whilst Vox was obviously on a call.

He pressed a sweet kiss to Vox's neck and Vox's voice faltered for a second before becoming a little more urgent and Alastor figured that he had nowhere to be today, so he lifted a hand blindly to Vox's crimped antenna and began toying with it.

"I won't tell you again, Valentino."

Alastor frowned at the name and opened his eyes, wondering why Valentino had called Vox.

...Only to realise that Vox wasn't on a call.

Alastor's gaze snapped to the door and he tensed at the sight of Valentino hovering just inside the room, upper arms crossed and teeth bared as a bottle of whisky hung limply from one of

his lower hands.

“This is a fucking joke,” Valentino snapped. “I said I was fucking sorry. I’ve brought you your favourite whisky. I stopped filming that porn you didn’t like. What else do I have to do to get you to forgive me? You want me to suck your dick? I’ll suck your dick!”

Vox narrowed his eyes and tugged Alastor closer. “Get out.”

Valentino made a sound of frustration. “Fine. *Fine*. You want to fuck the Radio Demon. Go ahead. I don’t care. Use him however you want. I can share.” He forced a smile. “But save a little something for me, yeah? Fifty years together means *something*. We were good together, amorcito.”

The lights flashed in warning and Valentino glanced up at them warily.

“Get the fuck out of my room, Valentino. It’s over. We’re *done*,” Vox growled.

Valentino’s antennae drooped before he forced another smirk. “How many times have we said that to each other, mi vida? This is... It’s just another bump in the road. We can figure it out.”

“You’re fucking delusional,” Vox said lowly. “You’re lucky I’m in business with you because I would have killed you at that meeting.” Vox gritted his teeth. “Keep testing my patience though and it’ll become a viable option.”

Valentino stiffened. “What is your problem? It was just a video. A video you’ve now deleted. Oh, and thanks, by the way, for deleting my fucking account. That was real mature of you, Mister CEO.”

Vox’s fans flicked on with his rising anger. Alastor settled more comfortably against Vox’s chest, content to watch the show. He contemplated summoning a bowl of popcorn merely to piss Valentino off, but he didn’t want to ruin Vox’s clean sheets.

“You revealed to all of Hell that Alastor was *assaulted* and you’re seriously asking what *my* problem is?” Vox asked dangerously.

“What? You can publicly battle him, call him an *outdated fossil* and threaten to destroy him live on air, but the moment I post a sexy video about him, *I’m* the monster?” Valentino snorted dismissively. “Rather hypocritical, wouldn’t you say?”

Charge crackled over Vox’s frame and Alastor’s hair fluffed a little from the burst of static. He rolled off Vox and settled against the headboard with an amused smirk, lest he be accidentally electrocuted by the other media demon.

“You revealed to a room of *Overlords* that we were on chains,” Vox said through gritted teeth.

Valentino shrugged. “They won’t know if I’m lying or not. And even if they think I’m telling the truth, they won’t know *who* owns your souls.”

The lights flickered and flashed.

“Get out of my room before I fucking incinerate you.”

Valentino scowled. “You’re being childish. You can’t sulk forever. Look, just... finish fucking Alastor and then I’ll meet you in your office and we’ll talk. I’ve been thinking and maybe I *have* been a little rough with you recently, but in fairness, you did *ask* me to and-”

Alastor barked out a laugh.

Valentino narrowed his eyes. “Something funny?”

Alastor smiled smugly. “You can’t help yourself, can you?”

Valentino scowled and Vox eyed him curiously.

Alastor leaned forwards. “You’re panicking because you’ve realised you might have gone a little too far, pushed one too many of Vox’s buttons, and you can *feel* that this time is different. This fight isn’t like the others. In the past, Vox has always returned to you, but this time... oh, this time doesn’t feel the same, does it? Vox might not come back and that *scares* you, doesn’t it?”

Valentino pursed his lips, antennae low and fists clenched, and Alastor laughed again.

“You’ve come here with a bottle of liquor and a half-cocked apology and you’re going to pretend that you’re perfectly fine with seeing me in Vox’s bed, when in reality, it’s eating you up inside, teasing at your thoughts, confirming what you already know and don’t want to admit to yourself. So, you’re playing everything down, making it seem like what you did and said wasn’t a big deal, and in the past, that’s worked for you because you convinced Vox that you were the only one who could give him what he needed.”

Valentino swallowed and Alastor grinned. “That’s what you do, isn’t it? You convince Vox that he *needs* you when really, you need him. You manipulate him, tell him you’re only doing as he asked, tell him he’s being immature or childish for having *feelings*, you belittle him, blame him for your actions, *humiliate* him so that he never steps out of line when it comes to what you want... and now you’re telling him that he can have me. As though you’re granting him *permission*. And you make it sound as though he has no choice but to eventually make amends with you, to *apologise*, even though he has done nothing wrong.”

“Fuck you, asshole,” growled Valentino. “You have no idea what Vox and I have. You think you can just waltz in here like you own the place and fucking *steal* him from me after fifty years? I’ve been lovers with him longer than you were even *friends*.”

Alastor smiled pleasantly and glanced over at Vox. “What do you want, my dear? You are the star of the hour, after all.”

Vox blinked at him and waved his hand vaguely. “Obviously I want you, but hey, don’t let that stop you. I’m enjoying the show. By all means, fight my battles for me. Fucking love it when you get possessive over me.”

Alastor made a sound of amusement and turned smugly to the scowling Valentino. “You heard the man.” He smirked deviously. “Looks like he isn’t crawling back to you this time, *amorcito*.”

Valentino growled and reached into his pocket, retrieving his gun and aiming it at Alastor’s head. A shadowy tendril snatched it from his grip and dropped it on the table beside Alastor.

Alastor clicked his tongue in disapproval. “Careful. You could kill someone with that!”

Valentino reached into his other pocket and the shadow dragged the second weapon from him before he could fully close his fingers around it.

“Not the sharpest spoon in the drawer, are we?” Alastor chirped cheerily. “Now, go to your room. An adult will deliver your juice box shortly.”

Valentino trembled with poorly restrained fury. “¡Pedazo de mierda - que te folle un pez!”

Alastor blinked, smiling blankly, and slipped an arm around Vox’s waist. “Well, I have no idea what that means, but Vox and I have fifty years of fighting to rectify. Mind if I borrow him for... oh, say... the rest of eternity?” He wiggled his fingers at Valentino in a cheeky wave.

Valentino stepped further into the room but leapt backwards when a bolt of electricity struck the floor in front of him, originating from the overhead spotlight. He turned a wild gaze to Vox.

“My patience is wearing thin,” Vox warned.

Valentino's shoulders dropped a fraction, eyes growing wider in shock. "...Voxy, please. Can we just talk about this?"

Vox scoffed. "Now, where have I heard that before? Right, that's what I said to you the night you ignored my pleas for you to *stop*. That's what I said to you before you made me feel like a worthless freak, before you told me that what *I* want doesn't matter, before you called me a pathetic, rusty, outdated *machine*." Vox smiled viciously. "So, let me tell you what you told me."

He stroked Alastor's ear pointedly, settling against his side. "What you want, Valentino, doesn't matter. You're nothing but a vile *whore*. You mean nothing to anyone and no one will ever want you. You're worthless, *weak*. No one respects you. I feel sick whenever I look at you. You're more monster than person."

Silence fell between the trio and Valentino's bottom lip quivered.

Alastor whistled. "*Ouch*. That's gotta hurt!" A laugh track played distantly.

Valentino stared at Vox for a long moment before smashing the whisky bottle against the wall and stalking out without a word.

Vox glanced wearily at the fresh stain on the wall and closed his eyes.

Alastor sobered and wrapped himself around the Television Demon, caressing one of his antennae as Vox cracked an eye open to watch him.

"Thank you," Vox murmured.

Alastor raised an eyebrow.

Vox sighed, letting his head tip against the headboard. “For defending me. For being here. For *grounding* me.”

Alastor nuzzled at the edge of Vox’s screen. “You didn’t think I’d sit idly by while he tried to manipulate you, did you?”

Vox shook his head. “No, it’s more than that. You’re right - I do always crawl back to him. He wears me down and degrades me until I’m too exhausted to keep fighting, so I go back to him and I apologise because he always makes it sound like it’s my fault and I always believe him.” Vox’s eyes slipped shut. “And I let him do whatever he wants to me because he claims to love me and no one touches a *machine* gently because its parts are all replaceable, so I’ve come to learn that to be touched, I have to *hurt*, but sometimes Val soothes the hurt and whispers sweet words to me, and other times he degrades me even when touching me gently and I- I-”

He cut himself off, pressing his lips together and Alastor frowned and caressed the ports at the back of his screen.

“What I’m saying is if you weren’t here, I think I *would* have crawled back to him,” Vox said quietly.

Alastor blinked in surprise. “My dear, give yourself more credit-”

Vox shook his head quickly. “No, it’s true. That’s what always happens. I talk a big game, try to defend myself, he storms off and then I feel guilty and reason that I *did* ask him to be rough with me and degrade me, and I’ve treated him like shit too these past decades because I knew he wanted me but I never really wanted him, and it isn’t *always* bad between us - there are some really good parts too, and he never used to be like this. It’s my fucking fault that he’s like this and he’s traumatised from his own past and I weaponise it against him all the time; I call him a worthless *whore* and-”

He clamped his mouth and glanced at the shattered whisky bottle and Alastor watched the doubt and guilt flicker across his face in real-time. He watched Vox overthink the last few minutes, watched his frown pull deeper, watched his mouth draw downwards as his thoughts shifted in a different direction.

“...Y’know, maybe I am being a little childish,” Vox said slowly and Alastor’s ears swung upright in alarm. “I mean, I can break things off with him without *punishing* him, right? We... We’ve punished each other enough. *I’ve* punished him enough. And years ago, I *did* ask him to treat me the way he does. I never asked him to *stop*. And maybe it was a little cruel of me to rub you in his face when I know how he feels about me.” Vox chewed his lip. “Would it be so bad if I apologised? Just to soften things between us? I work with him...”

Alastor slid on top of Vox, pinning him to the mattress. “Stop,” he said gently. “Vox, *think* about what you’re saying. This is exactly what he wants you to do - he wants you to doubt and regret and feel responsible for *his* actions. But you *aren’t* responsible. You would never release to all of Hell that I had been *raped*. Even through all of our fights, you never publicly released that my soul belonged to someone else. You aren’t responsible for Valentino’s choices.”

Vox stared at him, fingers curling into the sheets. “Okay, but-”

“And you say you’re being childish, but he’s the one who just smashed a bottle against your wall because he couldn’t get his own way,” continued Alastor. “You say you’re the one punishing him, but why is it that you’re always the one having to apologise? You say you never asked him to stop degrading you or treating you so roughly, but you *did* and he ignored you. He told you that it didn’t matter what you wanted.”

Alastor scowled, anger simmering in his gut, and Vox fell quiet beneath him. “And he weaponises your past against you all the time! He treats you like a machine! He thinks he can do whatever he wants to you because you can replace certain parts of yourself, and then he has the *audacity* to tell you he does it because he *loves* you? Because he’s the only one who *wants* to touch you.” Alastor shook his head furiously. “No, the good parts are only *good* because they’re better than the *shit* he usually gives you!”

Alastor’s pupils flickered between their normal state and radio dials as his antlers grew an inch taller. “You didn’t *rub me in his face*; he walked in on us! He walked in on us in an intimate moment and he got jealous, so he tried to make it *your* fault and when you got angry at him for everything he’s done to you, to *us*, he tried to play it off as though he was fine with us, as though *he* was the better person and you were overreacting. Well, you’re not overreacting! You’ve put up with fifty years of abuse and manipulation and his *tantrums* and you’ve been *miserable* throughout all of it. Now you’ve finally found a modicum of

happiness, he wants to snatch it away and punish you for it because he's jealous and he knows he can't fucking control you anymore!"

Alastor's chest heaved and he realised his frame had stretched into something more demonic, antlers tall and wide and dials swinging wildly in his eyes.

Vox stared up at him in awe. He raised a hand to Alastor's cheek, touching it reverently and Alastor leaned into his fingers with a frown.

"I'll admit that I don't like to share," Alastor said quietly. "I... I don't like the thought of you being intimate with someone else. But I understand that there are things you want that I can't give you. I won't stop you if you wish to seek out those things with other people, but *please... Please*, Vox, don't seek them with Valentino. I can't keep watching him hurt you. I can't keep watching him fill your head with lies and shame. I can't keep watching you lose your confidence and your dignity, your *smile...*"

Vox blinked and scowled at Alastor. "Okay, we're gonna double back on that first part in just a minute, but, uh..." He smiled sheepishly. "Yeah. Okay. Okay, I think I get what you're saying. His choices aren't my fault and I'm *allowed* to be mad at him for everything he's done, even if I hurt him too. And... And I'm allowed to be happy, even if he's not a part of it." He trailed his fingers down Alastor's jaw. "I'm allowed to be happy with you and not feel guilty over it."

Alastor blew out a breath of relief and nodded, and Vox's gaze roamed over his face curiously, taking in the altered features. He touched the stitches at Alastor's lips and the glowing red 'X' between his eyes and he shot Alastor a hopeful grin.

Alastor huffed a laugh and leaned down, allowing Vox to kiss him. His enthusiasm was simultaneously amusing and endearing and he lapped inside Alastor's mouth and gripped the wide base of an antler and then he shifted to kiss each and every stitch holding Alastor's smile in place. He kissed the corners of Alastor's mouth with such tenderness that Alastor sank down into his body and like this, he was far larger than Vox, but the Television Demon wrapped an arm around him anyway and held him tightly.

"Now," Vox said eventually as he rubbed a fluffy ear. "Care to repeat the part about me sleeping with other people because you aren't ready for sex?"

Alastor grimaced and shrank down to his usual size. “After what happened last night, I was thinking...”

“This is going to be the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard, isn’t it? And it’s going to make me angry and you upset and it’ll end with me saying that I don’t want anyone else, that you are enough, that I’ve only ever wanted you, that I don’t care if you can *never* give me sex because I *love* you and you mean far more to me than a roll around a mattress.”

Alastor hesitated before shaking his head. “Really, Vox. It’s okay. I know you enjoy sex and I... I wouldn’t like to deprive you of something you enjoy when the solution is so simple. Really, I don’t mind. I... I can learn to share you if it’s a mere ‘hook-up’, or a ‘one-night stand’ or... whatever else they call it these days.” He licked his lips. “As long as your heart belongs to me, I don’t mind.”

Reassuring static swept through Alastor as Vox petted his ear. “You do mind. I would never do that to you, Al. Val and I did that shit to each other all the time and it *hurt*. Well, it hurt me, anyway. And it never felt right, even though I was doing it to Val. How do you think it’s going to feel if I do that to *you*? To cheat on someone I actually love?”

Alastor couldn’t quite meet his gaze. “I’ll clearly never be able to give you sex. And it isn’t cheating if I’m giving you permission. I know you enjoy intercourse, and I... I don’t want you to *resent* me for withholding it from you.”

Vox scowled and tucked Alastor’s head into his neck, fingers sliding into Alastor’s hair as his other arm wrapped more securely around his back.

“Listen to me, sweet buck.” Alastor’s ears twitched at the endearment. That was a new one... He quite liked it. Vox didn’t see him as a vulnerable and weak little fawn like Roo did and he didn’t see him as a pretty, delicate doe like Valentino did. Vox saw him as strong and powerful and dangerous, yet *gentle* when it was just the two of them.

He liked that. He liked that a lot. He pressed his lips to Vox’s neck gratefully as he listened.

“I have a lot of sex because apparently I’m the most touch-starved man in all of Hell,” said Vox. “Sex in Hell is usually violent and painful but it’s the only way I could think of to get people to touch me willingly without, y’know... fighting. So, it isn’t the *sex* I enjoy. It’s touch. I prefer a gentle touch, but... well, I’ll take what I’m given.”

He squeezed Alastor affectionately. “Except now I have *exactly* what I want. Because you can’t give me sex, but last night was fucking *amazing* because I don’t need to have sex with you for you to *want* to touch me so tenderly. Does that... Does that make sense?”

Alastor’s smile widened slowly and he nodded.

Vox took his hand and laced their fingers together. “This would be enough,” he whispered. “If this was all you could give me, it would still be better than all the sex I’ve ever had. The fact you can give me more than that, especially after everything you’ve faced on Earth and Purgatory, and after everything I put you through... Alastor, why would I *ever* want anyone else? Why would I ever want to hurt you like that when you’re so good to me?”

Alastor slipped his hand under Vox’s shirt but raised his eyebrows in surprise when Vox caught his wrist.

“You don’t owe me anything,” he said sternly. “I don’t want you thinking that you *have* to touch me just because I enjoy it. You do what you’re comfortable with but I don’t ever want you pushing yourself too far. If this is going to work, we need to be able to trust each other, we need to feel safe talking to each other about what we like and what we don’t.” He exhaled uneasily. “The way you were shaking last night... Al, I never want to be the cause of that again. I never want to see you like that again.”

Alastor traced swirling patterns over Vox’s bare stomach. “It will happen again,” he said quietly. “And you may be the cause, and you may not.”

Vox stiffened and Alastor nuzzled into his neck. “But it’s okay as long as you take care of me like you did last night.”

“...I didn’t do anything.”

“You stopped,” Alastor whispered. “You stayed even when I flinched away from you. You comforted me. You made me feel safe.”

“That was the least I could do after pushing you too far!”

Alastor chuckled and brushed his fingers higher up Vox’s body, grazing over his vents until Vox giggled.

“It was an accident,” Alastor said softly. “It’ll happen again. It won’t stop me from wanting you. It won’t stop me from trying to give you more. I *want* to give you more, my love. I want you to have all of me - I just don’t think I’ll get there. But I’ll keep trying.”

Vox’s breath hitched as Alastor’s fingers sank deep into his vents. “In the meantime, I can find other ways to bring you pleasure,” he purred.

“Fuuuck,” Vox groaned and Alastor propped himself up on an elbow to study Vox’s face as his claws grazed delicate filters.

Vox’s fans flicked on, eyebrows furrowed slightly as he squeezed his eyes shut and licked his lips. Alastor dipped a claw into a filter, exploring the electronics below, and Vox suddenly arched with a stifled cry.

Alastor smirked and scraped the tip of his claw over the sensor again. There was the sound of electronics powering down and Alastor felt Vox’s vents attempting to close.

“You don’t like that?” Alastor asked curiously.

Vox’s voice crackled with static. “That’s the sensor that detects whether I’m in water.”

Alastor raised an eyebrow and nudged the sensor again and a warning message about open vents whilst being submerged popped up on Vox's screen. He quickly dismissed it and let his head flop back against the pillows.

"It's sensitive," he whimpered.

Alastor smirked and plucked his claw against a small bundle of wires. Vox arched again, fans working harder and his lips parted silently.

"Part of my nervous system," he gasped and Alastor smiled sweetly and kissed his lips before giving the wires a little tug.

Vox whined into his mouth.

"If I take your shirt off and press my favourite button, will I be able to see what I'm doing inside you?" Alastor breathed against his lips.

Vox nodded.

Alastor hummed in satisfaction and slowly unbuttoned Vox's pyjamas, allowing the Television Demon to catch his breath.

"Alastor, you really don't have to do this just because I-" He cut himself off with a moan as Alastor's fingers returned to his vents. Slender fingers touched his hip and Vox's skin became transparent once more.

A devious thought crossed Alastor's mind and he slid on top of Vox and wedged his fingers in both sets of vents, finding the matching bundles of wires and giving them a gentle tug.

Vox's hands clamped around his hips as he stared up at Alastor with wide eyes.

Alastor was fascinated by the sight of his own fingers inside his picturebox. He touched a thicker cable and received a small but sharp shock from it.

“Electrical equivalent of a major blood vessel,” Vox said quietly as he rubbed soothing circles into Alastor’s hip. Alastor thrust his fingers deeper into the vents, until they were buried up to the knuckle, and Vox cried out and gripped his hips tighter.

“Good?” Alastor teased.

“Fucking amazing,” Vox whimpered. “Kiss me, please.”

“What happened to *‘I’ll destroy you, you old-timey prick’*?” Alastor drawled. “I thought the great Television Demon was above begging?”

“Fuck you,” Vox gasped as Alastor toyed with another set of thin cables either side of him. “I’m not above begging *you*.” He whined softly and arched again. “Shit, no one’s ever touched me like this, Al.”

Alastor raised an eyebrow. “No one?”

“The last time someone touched my vents, they took a lighter to them. It took me *hours* to scrape out all the melted filters and replace all the broken sensors. I smelled like burned plastic and metal for *days*.”

Fury washed over Alastor like a tidal wave and he allowed his body to stretch into something a little more menacing. Vox’s eyes grew round and his heart raced with obvious excitement.

Alastor’s elongated fingers allowed him to reach more cables and components and he touched and caressed each one, studying Vox’s expressions of bliss.

It was a pity he couldn't touch Vox's biological organs, but they were protected from his components by a synthetic wall and Alastor had no intention of damaging it.

"Tell me what you want, my dear," Alastor said.

"Kiss me. I want you to kiss me," Vox said hastily and Alastor's gaze softened.

"People are usually afraid of this face."

"Well, I want to fucking kiss it."

Alastor huffed a laugh and leaned down to kiss Vox and he chuckled when Vox immediately fisted his hair and slung an arm around his shoulders to keep him in place.

Their tongues met and Vox thoroughly *ravished* his mouth, leaving no part unexplored. When Alastor attempted to pull back, Vox dragged him in deeper, sucking his tongue and nipping his lip and whimpering into his mouth when Alastor's claws grazed sensitive wires.

Vox's chest heaved, lungs visibly expanding beneath transparent skin and muscle. His gaze was a little glazed as he stared up at Alastor adoringly and his lips were bruised and swollen and shiny with spit. He was the most beautiful creature Alastor had ever laid eyes upon.

Alastor peppered kisses over his chest before lapping at an LED strip and Vox trembled as he watched. Alastor met his gaze and smoothed his tongue over the strip of light and a soft whine escaped Vox.

They stayed like that for a few minutes; Alastor's fingers toying with Vox's inner components as he licked and sucked and swirled his tongue around the LED strip that served as Vox's nipple and when Vox carefully began to relax into the sensation, Alastor removed his fingers from Vox's vents and thrust his tongue into one instead.

Vox gasped and squirmed and when his hands dipped underneath Alastor's shirt, Alastor grabbed his wrists and pinned them against the mattress.

"No touching," muttered Alastor. "This is about you."

"I want to touch," Vox protested and Alastor kissed his vents sweetly.

"Tough shit."

Vox huffed and wriggled half-heartedly. "Fine, but only if I get to rub your feet later."

Alastor looked up, startled. "...My feet?"

Vox nodded enthusiastically. "I want to play with your hooves."

"...My hooves? What-" Alastor shook his head in exasperation. "Fine. What fascination you can possibly have with my hooves is beyond me."

"And *you* aren't allowed to touch me when I'm playing with your hooves," Vox said.

Alastor rolled his eyes. "Sure."

"Is it a deal?" Vox asked with a devious grin as he offered his hand.

Alastor eyed the hand suspiciously before snorting and shaking in agreement. "Deal."

Green magic met blue, spiralling up both of their arms in a strange pattern that looked like a combination of lightning bolts and vines. Their eyes flashed with their respective magic as the deal was sealed and Alastor shook his head in amusement before plunging his tongue into Vox's vents again.

Vox laced their fingers together and sighed in pleasure.

Vox hummed an old tune as he played around with some code for his latest project. He wiggled his hips a little as he typed, sipping at a sweet and sugary latte every so often, and he practically danced over to his desk, where one of his drones lay beside the tablet that controlled it. He fiddled with the tablet, still humming to himself and slid across the floor theatrically until he reached his console. He drummed on the back of his chair in time with his humming, then whirled it around and threw himself into it, spinning once with a grin before focusing on his screens again.

“Who are you and what have you done with Vox?”

Vox glanced over at the door to see Velvette leaning against the frame with a smirk.

He chuckled. “Sold him for spare parts. I’m just a bunch of AI programmes smushed together to sound like a real person.”

“An upgrade, then,” Velvette teased as she stepped into the room.

“Hey, wait until you find out about the button on my back that dispenses free coffee,” Vox drawled. “Oh wait, aren’t you too young for coffee?”

“Fuck you, old man,” Velvette scoffed as she raised a middle finger at him. She crossed her arms and smiled lop-sidedly. “Seriously though, you look *happy*.”

Vox returned the smile. “Y’know, for once I... I *feel* happy.”

Velvette smirked. “Wouldn’t have anything to do with your arch-nemesis, the Radio Demon, would it?”

Vox’s grin widened. “What would he have to do with anything? No, this is just the adrenaline rush kicking in from my new project!”

Velvette eyed the drone on his desk. “Uh-huh. Right. Nothing to do with how you were sitting on Alastor’s lap last night with your shirt off, playing with your drone whilst he played with your ports?”

Vox froze, smile falling as he stared at her. Unease prickled his skin as he remembered the previous evening. It had been wonderful, as evenings with Alastor tended to go these days, but his skin had been transparent for most of the night because Alastor had requested it, which meant if Velvette had seen them together...

“Happiness suits you, Vox,” Velvette said gently. “I like this new side of you.”

Vox swallowed. “...How much did you see?”

“Oh, don’t worry, I didn’t stick around long,” Velvette scoffed. “So if you two got it on, I didn’t see it.” She brightened. “But I could see your fucking organs! Vox, that is so cool! You never told me your skin is *transparent*. ”

Vox stiffened but Velvette didn’t seem to notice. “You’re like one of those little glassfish. My dad used to keep them and I always thought they were a bit weird but, I don’t know, after seeing you last night, I kinda want some of my own.” She frowned and met his gaze. “So, do you have like... mechanical versions of every organ? Because I’m pretty sure I saw a mechanical lung in there- Vox, are you alright?”

The room spun and Vox pressed himself against the back of the chair. “You... You *saw*...”

Velvette crossed the distance between them. “Yeah. Why? Is that a problem or something? I didn’t mean to. I was just passing and I noticed the lights were on in your office. I promise I didn’t see anything else.”

“...You don’t care.”

Velvette frowned, obviously confused. “Don’t care about what?”

“My skin.”

Velvette pulled a face. “What do you mean?”

“It made Val feel sick. He couldn’t even look at me. He called me a freak.”

Understanding dawned across Velvette’s face and she frowned. “That son of a- Look, Vox, I’m not Valentino. I love the guy, but he can be a huge piece of shit when he wants to be. And I have to say I’m glad you broke things off because he was clearly making you miserable and Alastor seems to be taking good care of you.” She narrowed her eyes. “But if he starts making you feel like shit, I’ll rip his fucking head off.”

Vox huffed a laugh and Velvette’s gaze softened. “I think your body’s awesome and if you were one of my models, I would definitely be showing it off.” She blinked, eyes raising to the ceiling thoughtfully. “You’d look good in some dark lace. Maybe a bodysuit. Little window to reveal your heart. Graphite corded belt to symbolise cables... Maybe an off-the-shoulder number... Pretty red choker...”

Vox’s gaze softened. “And I’ve lost her,” he drawled before he fished inside his console drawer for a notepad and pen. He pushed them into her hands. “Go on. Go sketch.”

She tapped the pen against her lip and she turned around, mind lost somewhere between silk sleeves and a velvet waistband.

He watched her leave with a smile, warmth filling his chest as he continued his project.

Velvette thought his body was *cool*.

He bobbed in his seat as he hummed, smile growing once more. After a few minutes, he wheeled his chair to the radio on his desk and flipped it on to catch the end of Alastor's show.

He grinned at the jaunty swing number and wheeled back over to his console, leaping out of the chair as he worked so he could swing his hips in time with the music.

After a couple of minutes of silly dancing and singing, a pair of arms slid around Vox's waist from behind and Vox chuckled. He swung his hips into Alastor's palms as he worked and his eyes fluttered shut when Alastor kissed the back of his neck slowly, tenderly.

"You're going the right way for the hoof rub I mentioned last week," teased Vox and Alastor peppered kisses down his neck and between his shoulders.

Hands slipped under his shirt and over his stomach, splaying there possessively and Vox made a soft sound of approval, tipping his head to the side when Alastor began mouthing wet kisses over his neck.

One of Alastor's hands dipped below his waistband and Vox arched an eyebrow. This was new.

"You don't have to do anything you aren't comfortable with," Vox reminded and Alastor hesitated before his hand travelled lower beneath Vox's belt.

“That’s all we have time for this afternoon,” came Alastor’s voice over the radio. *“Thank you, and good day!”*

Vox froze and finally looked down at the hands holding him.

“What the fuck?!” Vox snarled as he tore out Valentino’s grip and threw himself against the nearest wall. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Valentino held his hands up placatingly. “You… You looked happy. I wanted… I wanted to remind you that we could be good together.” He offered Vox a hopeful smile. “I… I get it now. I *understand*. I’ve seen you and Alastor together - you want tenderness. You want *praise*. I can give you that. That’s what I wanted to give you in the first place, but you wouldn’t let me. You were so fixated on *him*-” He cut himself off and his smile widened.

He looked almost deranged. “But you have him now. And there’s something he can’t give you that I can. I *miss* you, Voxy. I can give you pleasure and intimacy in ways he’ll never be able to and then… and then you can go back to him. We could share you.”

“You’ve lost your fucking mind,” hissed Vox as he eyed the lights. “I don’t want you.”

“Just give me a chance.”

“You had fifty *years*!” Vox snarled. “Fifty years of degrading me and making me feel like *shit*!”

“And so did Alastor!” Valentino snapped. “And it was worse with him because he *fought* you. He humiliated you publicly! Abandoned you!” Valentino closed his eyes and took a breath. “You gave him a chance to redeem himself. Give me one too.”

“No,” growled Vox, glancing at the lights again and jerking backwards when he noticed how close Valentino suddenly was.

“You’re not being fair,” Valentino whined. “Just one evening together. Please? And then you can go straight back to Alastor if you don’t like it and I promise I’ll leave you alone. But if you do like it... I’m sure we can come to an arrangement...”

He slid a hand around Vox’s hip and Vox pumped a few hundred volts through him. Valentino leapt backwards with a yelp, cradling his hand.

“Touch me again and I’ll kill you,” Vox warned. “I mean it.”

Valentino’s antennae lowered, upset, before he scowled and lurched forwards, pinning Vox’s arms either side of him and ramming his tongue into his mouth.

Vox bristled as drugged saliva dripped down his throat and before his thoughts had a chance to cloud, he gathered a charge.

Valentino slotted something into one of the ports at his spine and Vox collapsed as an electromagnetic pulse swept through his body, disrupting all of his electronics.

His screen powered down and all of his mechanical parts came to an abrupt halt. His limbs stopped responding and the processor that served as his brain began to flicker and fail. He blacked out several times as his biological organs attempted to overcompensate for the rest of his body failing, but his nervous system was entirely shut down and his senses of sight, sound, smell, and touch were non-functional.

His processor initiated a failsafe protocol but with no senses working, it was like being in a void of nothingness - like being back in Purgatory - except this time, Vox couldn’t scream or move.

His processor attempted a reboot of his systems several times, but the EMP device was still attached to his spine and every surge of energy reactivated it, sending his systems failing once more.

It was psychological torture. Vox was fully conscious but with no senses and no idea of time or what was happening to him. What Valentino was doing to him...

The EMP device was suddenly disconnected and Vox's body began a sluggish, riddled-with-errors reboot.

The first sense to return was sound.

Someone was fighting. Screaming. There were heavy crashes and snarls and gunshots.

The next sense to return was smell.

Blood. Gunpowder. Cigarette smoke. *Musk*.

Taste returned at the same time his screen powered on.

Valentino's sweet saliva. He grit his teeth in disgust.

Sight was the next sense to return and he opened his eyes to Valentino's plush carpet. He could see that his wrists were bound but he couldn't feel them yet.

He raised his gaze to see Valentino standing in front of him, phone clasped in one hand and guns clasped in the others - each one aiming for a snarling, monstrous-looking Alastor. Alastor's silhouette leapt from wall to wall, screeching silently as it tried to slip past Valentino, but Valentino wiggled the phone at it.

"This isn't the only activator," he hissed. "So back the fuck off!"

The silhouette bayed and snarled and Alastor crushed the EMP device between his claws with a furious growl. "I'm going to end your fucking life, you filthy whore."

"No, we're going to come to an arrangement or I'll activate the IED and it'll destroy his processor for good, and then it'll be your fucking fault that he's *dead*."

Fear gripped Vox's stomach. *IED?* There was an explosive plugged into his back?

Alastor snarled but remained still. "What do you want?"

Vox shifted a little and Alastor met his gaze briefly before baring his teeth at Valentino.

"You can do whatever you want with him during the day but I get him during the night," Valentino said. "Break the deal and I break his processor."

"You foul piece of shit," Alastor hissed, diads swinging in his eyes. "Once I remove that explosive--"

"You can't," sneered Valentino. "I've soldered it onto his processor. Touch it and it'll activate."

Ice settled in Vox's veins and his stomach rolled. "What the fuck, Valentino?" His voice crackled with static.

Valentino kept his gaze on Alastor. "Welcome back, Princess. Did you have a nice nap?"

His systems were brimming with errors. "How long have I been out?"

"Two weeks," snarled Alastor. "You've been missing for two weeks."

Vox froze then glanced around. "...But I'm in Valentino's *bedroom*. Surely someone would have thought to look in here? I mean, Velvette always checked in here if she couldn't find-" He cut himself off abruptly when Alastor shifted slightly to reveal an unconscious, bloodied body behind him.

Velvette.

Vox stared at her torn clothes and bruised skin. He lifted his gaze slowly to Valentino. "You're a fucking monster."

Valentino squared his jaw, eyebrows drawing downwards. "If she had just *listened*... If she had just trusted me and hadn't gone snooping around... I wasn't going to touch her, I swear. But when she found you, she looked at me like... like..." He shook his head. "I knew she'd contact Alastor. I knew she wouldn't like seeing you like that. But she didn't understand! I was going to put you back together!"

The weight of the situation settled over him and Vox felt sick. It hadn't skipped his attention that his sense of touch had yet to return.

"What do you mean 'put me back together'?" he whispered in horror. He looked down at himself and tried to push onto his ass, but his body wouldn't quite move as he wanted it to and he slumped onto his side instead. He couldn't see his body. It was dressed in his usual suit.

"What the fuck did you do to me?" Vox whimpered, static distorting his voice. "How did you get into my processor if I was offline? It's protected! What did you... What did you do to me?"

"I was careful!" Valentino protested, gaze still trained on Alastor. "I made sure not to cut anything vital in your biological systems. But cables can be replaced and your bones are titanium and... and muscle and skin can *heal*! I... I had to find a place to hide you. Somewhere to store you."

Vox vomited, surprised to see anything that wasn't bile. Valentino must have force fed him whilst he was stuck in that state of nothingness...

For *two weeks*.

He vomited again.

"I had to!" Valentino argued. "Because Alastor would never have agreed to *sharing* if he wasn't forced to."

"You cut him up and hid him in boxes in your closet!" Alastor roared.

"So we could have a civil conversation," snapped Valentino. "I needed to make preparations so you wouldn't fucking kill me! But I didn't know Velvet was already on the phone to you and you came earlier than I anticipated and-" He cut himself off and shook his head in frustration.

"Why the fuck can't I feel anything?" Vox whimpered. "Why can't I feel the carpet or the ropes around my wrists or- or-"

"I couldn't remember where all the wiring connected," Valentino admitted quietly. "And I accidentally severed some of them. Alastor came too early and I didn't have time to figure out how to put everything back... But that's the beauty of you being a machine, Voxy! You... You can fix it! Replace the bits that broke!"

Vox began to sob. He couldn't stop the waves of despair threatening to drown him. He had been forced into a sense-absent coma for two weeks even though his consciousness was very much alive, and in that time he had been mutilated, stuffed into boxes like an array of spare parts, had a fucking *bomb* soldered into his *brain*, had been stitched crudely back together with parts missing or broken, and he hadn't felt any of it. Still couldn't feel any of it.

“Don’t... Don’t cry, Vox,” Valentino said and he sounded genuinely startled. “It’s okay. Once we’ve figured out an arrangement, we can fix you. Alastor and I can take care of you. Together. We’ll explain everything to Velvette and... and we can all be happy. We all get what we want.”

Alastor’s silhouette edged towards Vox, looking distraught, but Valentino rounded on it and wiggled his phone. “No! We figure out a deal first. Then you can touch him.”

“I’m going to slit your throat while you sleep and watch you drown in your own warm blood,” Alastor growled.

“You get him during the day, I get him at night,” Valentino said coolly. “With room for flexibility, of course. But it isn’t like you can give him what he needs in bed anyway.”

“If you think I’ll let you put your foul hands on him-”

“Deal,” Vox sighed.

Valentino and Alastor glanced at him, stunned.

“Vox, you can’t be-”

“Just fucking say *yes*, Alastor! I’ve got a bomb soldered to my brain!”

Alastor tensed before shooting Valentino a disgusted glare. “Deal.”

Valentino brightened and lowered his weapons. “¡Fantástico! As long as you stick to the terms, that little IED won’t go *boom*.” He clicked his fingers and a small stack of papers appeared in his palm. “I just need you both to sign on the dotted line.”

He was fucking insane.

Still, Alastor and Vox signed - Vox on the floor since he couldn't convince his body to sit upright or stand.

"Now, let's get you fixed up," Valentino chirped as he turned to Vox and plucked him off the floor and placed him on the bed. Vox's breath hitched and he squirmed away from Valentino's touch, even though he couldn't feel it.

Alastor was beside him immediately, baring his teeth at Valentino as he wrapped a protective arm around Vox. "I'll fix him. Unlike you, I've studied his body and his wiring. I'm sure having to look at him for so long will only make you *nauseous* anyway."

Vox leaned into Alastor's hold, burying his face into his chest as he stifled his staticky sobs. Alastor rubbed his back.

Valentino frowned and eventually nodded. "Alright." He smiled. "And as a gesture of kindness, I'll let you have him tonight so you have time to fix him fully!"

Vox flinched. He truly was nothing more than a machine to Valentino...

Alastor growled at him before carefully lifting Vox off the bed, and it didn't escape Vox's attention that his silhouette hovered protectively over Velvette's prone form. As Alastor headed towards the exit, his silhouette picked Velvette up gently and glided after them.

"See you tomorrow night, Voxy!" Valentino called before the doors closed behind them.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Bit of gore towards the end. Sort of? Or maybe psychological torture?

The angst has returned >:)

Chapter 47: Entomology

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alastor's shadows locked the door behind them as he and his silhouette deposited Vox and Velvette carefully on Vox's bed.

There was a haunted look in Alastor's eyes despite the viciousness of his grin.

Vox met Alastor's gaze and Alastor summoned a glass of water for him but he couldn't command his arms to hold it, so Alastor brought it carefully to his lips and he downed it greedily.

He casted his gaze to the bruised Velvette, watching Alastor's silhouette stroke her hair. There was a bullet wound in her left shoulder.

"Two weeks?" Vox whispered and Alastor nodded and perched beside him on the bed, drawing him into his side and rubbing his arm. Vox couldn't feel it.

"I was awake for it, but all of my senses were offline. I had no track of time."

Alastor hesitated. "...You were awake? Even when he...?"

"There was just... darkness." He tore his gaze away from Velvette and glanced at Alastor. "Can you heal her?"

Alastor reached over and muttered something beneath his breath and familiar green sigils bounced in the air around them. Velvette's bruises faded, her wounds knitting together and leaving tiny scars as the only evidence that they had ever existed. She continued to sleep.

Vox glanced down at his suit once he was sure she was healed. “I want to see what he’s done to me.”

Alastor swallowed. “...Are you sure?”

“Show me.”

Alastor propped Vox against the headboard and slowly removed his coat, waistcoat, and tie. He paused at Vox’s shirt before carefully unbuttoning it.

Vox whimpered at the mess that was revealed.

There were layers of thick sutures at his shoulders where his arms had been severed and the wires threading through them were a tangled mess, some not even connected and others sparking haphazardly. Valentino had clearly tried to cut through his shoulder joint, but the cut wasn’t clean and the joint articulated poorly, the titanium bones grinding and wearing against each other.

Then, there was his torso. Vox’s biological organs were walled off from his electronics for protection, and his main processor - his *brain* - was hidden behind his liver, walled off from everything else to prevent damage. Usually, Vox could command those walls to lower for repairs when his systems were fully online, but Valentino had broken into the wall, damaged it and soldered an IED onto the vital processor, and in doing so, he had ruptured the wall protecting his organs.

Vox’s liver looked partially burned and blood had leaked into the section that held his electronics, damaging some of the components.

Vox trembled as Alastor slipped off his shoes and trousers, revealing more thick sutures at his pelvis and more tangled and sparking wiring. The important bundles of cables that passed from Vox’s abdomen through his pelvis and down his legs had been crudely severed, and these were the electrics that served as Vox’s motor control and nervous system to his lower half.

On the upper right of his lower back, there was a large square hole in his skin and muscle that had been messily stitched together - obviously how Valentino had gained access to his processor.

“Fuck,” Velvette breathed in horror and they turned to her in surprise. “How do we fix all that?”

Suddenly, tears streamed down Vox’s screen and his shoulders were wracked with jerky sobs.

Alastor splayed a hand over Vox’s stomach and muttered his chant again and sparking wires reconnected, components repaired themselves, bones mended, protective walls sealed over, Vox’s liver regenerated, sutures unravelled and skin healed, leaving thick, pale scars behind, and Vox’s nervous system suddenly booted online.

“Like that,” Alastor growled as the green sigils faded, but he tipped against the headboard, clearly tired. Healing magic took a lot of energy for the few demons that learned it.

Vox immediately latched onto Alastor, desperate to feel his warmth and solid muscle and his soft hair and his worn coat and, well, *everything*.

Two weeks without touch was torture.

Vox’s own personal Hell.

Alastor toyed with an antenna, eyes slipping shut. “That bomb is still active.”

“It’s fine,” muttered Vox as he buried his face deeper into Alastor’s chest.

“It’s not fucking *fine!*” Velvette fretted. “Valentino’s lost his fucking mind! There’s a bomb in you, Vox!”

Vox frowned into Alastor’s chest and waved a hand dismissively, relieved when it did as he asked it to. “Vel, trust me, it’s fine.”

“While I understand that you’ll regenerate if it detonates, you’ll lose your status as Overlord. You’ll lose all the souls on your chain, yet you’ll still be tied to Roo, *and* you could lose VoxTek, depending on how long it takes for you to regenerate,” Alastor said.

“He won’t lose VoxTek,” Velvette said firmly. “I won’t let that happen.”

Vox managed a small smile as he glanced over at her before he rolled onto his back between them. “It won’t detonate.”

“It will if we don’t do as Valentino asks,” Alastor said slowly. “We’ve just signed a contract.”

Vox snorted and slid off the bed. He opened a cupboard on the opposite side of the room. “Yeah, but Val’s a fucking idiot.” He sifted through the cupboard of old gizmos and gadgets he’d toyed around with in decades gone by. He grinned as he found the lightweight disruptor.

He returned to the bed and handed the gadget to Alastor. “Place the nozzle against my back and aim it at the IED, then press the button on the top.”

“What is that?” Velvette asked.

“I used to toy around with little IEDs in my early days here. Never used them properly, but it was fun to blow failed projects up. Always kept a disruptor around just in case the temperamental things didn’t go off. Basically, it shoots high velocity water at the explosive and separates all the bits that go *boom* to stop them from going *boom*.”

Alastor and Velvette blinked at him and Vox scoffed.

“Where do you think Val got the damn bomb in the first place? He must have stolen it from my room.”

Alastor glanced down at the disruptor. “I assume this will hurt?”

“Dunno. Never used it on myself. Probably. Might even blast a little hole through my liver.” He shrugged. “Or it might not. I think I’ve set it fairly low.”

“...You *think*?”

“I know I have. Shut up and shoot.”

There was a soft hiss and a sharp pain at Vox’s back that lasted no more than a second. He ran a system scan and smirked when the IED read as disconnected.

“Look at that. My liver remains unscathed and my brain unexploded,” Vox drawled and he felt Alastor touch the tiny hole in his back, sealing the skin and muscle with a muttered chant. “Like I said, Val’s a fucking idiot.”

“He put your decapitated head in a box,” Velvette whispered. “And your arms and legs and entire torso in separate boxes.”

Vox grimaced. “He’s a psychopathic idiot.”

“I thought you were fucking *dead*, Vox!” Velvette snarled before her lower lip wobbled. “When he caught me, I... Damn it, I was *scared*.”

Vox slipped an arm around her, pulling her smaller body into his side.

“I was still on the phone to Alastor,” she murmured. “He was convinced Val had you and I didn’t believe it at first, but Val got really cagey and wouldn’t come out of his room for *hours* at a time even for filming, and this morning when he slipped out, I snuck inside. I started going through his shit to see if there were any clues as to where you’d be and I saw the boxes in his closet and...”

She trailed off, looking disturbed. “I called Alastor immediately, but Val came back quicker than I expected, so I had to end the call before I could explain anything. I asked him why he’d *murdered* you and he told me that you were still alive. I told him he was a sick monster and he... he got really angry. He fucking *shot* me and I tried to do the whole *influence* thing on him, but he hit me with the butt of his gun and I tried to run, but then he picked up one of his fucking leather whips and-”

She drew her knees to her chest. “I blacked out.” She looked up at him. “I’m sorry, Vox.”

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for, Vel,” Vox chided gently. “You did well. You found me.”

She perked up a little as she glanced over at Alastor. “I woke up and I got to see Alastor go feral. That was badass. He’s pretty protective of you, y’know?”

Vox caught Alastor’s gaze and smiled tenderly. “Yeah. I know.”

Alastor stroked a finger down an antenna. “It wasn’t all for Vox, my dear. By the time I managed to find you, Vox was stitched up and unconscious and you were beside him looking rather *tenderised*. Despite that, when you managed to pry your eyes open, you tried to trip Valentino before he struck you again with a wing. You’re a plucky little thing.”

Velvette smirked but the expression faltered and she suddenly snuggled into Vox, wrapping her arms around him tightly. Vox and Alastor watched her in shock and Vox instinctively curled around her.

She thumped his chest with a fist. “I thought you’d *died*, Vox. With the Exterminations and all this angelic steel being passed around, I didn’t know if... I didn’t know whether you’d come back.”

Vox tugged her into his chest, petting her hair gently. “I’m here, Vel. It’ll take more than one of Val’s hair-brained schemes to off me.”

She scowled. “I mean what the actual *fuck* is wrong with him? Seriously? What the fuck?”

“I’m still impressed he figured out how to use my EMP device *and* one of my IEDs,” Vox mused. “Terrible execution, but points for trying, I suppose.”

“I wouldn’t call it *terrible* execution considering *you* were almost executed,” Alastor muttered drily. “He had enough brainpower to have the activation button installed on multiple devices.”

Again, Vox snorted and his phone’s apps flashed up on his face. “Yeah, one of which was *my* phone. Which would have allowed *me* to deactivate it.” A complicated-looking app appeared on Vox’s screen. He selected the name of the IED soldered onto his processor from a list of fifty-three and the words ‘detonate’ and ‘deactivate’ and ‘timer’ appeared on his screen.

The app closed and Vox’s face returned. “And yes, he would have had to guess which IED he’d used out of that list of fifty-three, if he could even find the list. I named them all so people *wouldn’t* be able to steal them and use them. Not that anyone ever has, until now. *Idiot.*”

Alastor smoothed a hand down his side. “...I did wonder why you agreed to his terms so quickly.”

Vox scoffed. “Because I knew I had a disruptor in here somewhere and it wasn’t worth the effort of arguing with him.” He scowled as he rubbed Velvete’s back. “Stupid plan or not, he crossed a fucking line.”

“Oh, I’d say he crossed multiple lines when he chopped you up and stuffed you into little boxes in his closet,” Alastor growled.

“I was actually referring to him hurting Velvete, but you have a point.”

“Picturebox, I’ve been restraining myself for quite some time now because you asked me not to kill him. Is there any possibility that your stance on that might have changed?”

Vox glanced down at Velvete and she looked up at him with a haunted gaze. He brushed the hair from her face.

“He’s all yours,” Vox muttered.

Alastor grinned wickedly and kissed the thick, new scar encircling Vox’s shoulder.

“I’ll make it *painful*, ” he whispered against Vox’s shoulder before he and his silhouette dissolved into the shadows.

Velvete snuggled deeper into Vox and he wrapped himself around her and waited for Alastor to return.

Alastor stalked through V-Tower like a tiger on a hunt. His silhouette prowled beside him on the wall and they made their way silently towards Valentino’s room.

They melted into the shadows and reappeared in Valentino’s oversized closet, crouching in the darkness behind the empty boxes Vox’s body had been stored in, ready to strike at any moment.

They watched Valentino with hungry grins.

Valentino brushed his antennae backwards as he stared at his phone.

Shit.

Had he... Had he gone too far this time?

Vox would *heal*, he was sure of that. And what wouldn't heal could be replaced. But Vox had... He'd been crying. Openly. Valentino had never seen Vox cry like that before outside of sex. And then, when Valentino had offered to fix him, he had flinched away into Alastor's arms, despite not even being able to feel his touch.

Then there was Velvette. How was he going to explain all of this to her? He had *panicked* and he'd shot her but that hadn't kept her down and he didn't want to shoot her again because he didn't want to *kill* her, so he'd grabbed the whip out of one of his sex toy drawers and-

He had never meant to *hurt* her.

Maybe she'd understand. She knew he loved Vox. She had seen how good they were together. She'd understand.

He rubbed his thumb over the edge of his phone, staring at the complicated app he'd installed after searching through Vox's phone. He didn't know how to use it.

Not that he *wanted* to blow Vox's processor up. No, because if he killed Vox, then Vox really would hate him once he regenerated, but he was being smart about it, because Alastor didn't know that. Alastor didn't know he wouldn't *actually* use the IED and that meant he would stick to the contract.

And then, once Vox remembered how good they were together, once he saw how *gentle* Valentino could be, how tender, Valentino would reveal everything and Vox would forgive him because he was never in any real danger, and sure, he would have to share his Television Demon with that damn Radio Bastard, but... but it would be worth it. Because Vox was worth it.

And they'd be happy. And the last fifty years of hurting each other, the last fifty years of misunderstandings and pining and resentment, none of it would matter because they would get their second chance, like Vox and Alastor had.

He took a deep breath. No, he had done the right thing. Vox was never in any real danger. Velvette would heal. You had to break a few eggs to make an omelette. Valentino was just putting in some groundwork - laying a foundation for their future happiness.

It would all work out in the end. Vox *always* forgave him. Always.

Because somewhere deep down, Vox loved him too. Even... even if he didn't realise it.

He frowned at his phone and slipped it into his pocket again.

His arm and back were sore. Alastor had managed to grab him before he'd had a chance to show him the app.

Vox was worth the pain.

Vox meant more than any whore he'd slept with.

He'd even managed to look at Vox's transparent skin as he had carefully divided him into sections. He could have left it opaque and just *guessed* where to cut, but he loved Vox and he had faced his own nausea to make sure he caused as little damage as possible. Sure, he had

heaved a few times, but Vox was *worth* the discomfort. That was how much Vox meant to him.

Why couldn't Vox see that?

He sighed, letting his head fall into his hands. Maybe... maybe he should check to see how they were doing? It hadn't skipped his notice that Alastor had taken Velvete too. What if... What if he was being cruel to her? He had a jealousy streak a mile wide; if he thought Vox was *attached* to her, would he hurt her? He certainly thought nothing of hurting Valentino.

He pulled a face and stood. Maybe he *should* check on them. Alastor might talk a good game, but he was stuck in the past. Vox was complicated, Alastor probably had no idea what he was doing.

He headed towards the door.

And froze as a menacing silhouette slid across it.

He whirled around to see Alastor standing behind him.

He fumbled for his phone and brandished it threateningly at the monster in front of him. "Lay a finger on me and I'll activate it."

Alastor's grin widened and he stepped closer.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

Brave face. Bluff him. "I mean it, creep," Valentino growled. "Touch me and his processor blows up!"

Alastor glanced at the phone. “You didn’t think this through, did you?” he purred.

Valentino bristled. He had put a *lot* of thought into this, thank you very much. He was quite proud of how smart he’d been.

“You’re just angry because you have to share him now,” Valentino said haughtily. “You’re looking for a way out of the contract.”

Alastor hummed in amusement and Valentino bristled. “You won’t find one,” he snapped. “I’ve thought of everything.”

Alastor chuckled and unease settled in Valentino’s gut.

“Velvette’s fine, by the way,” Alastor drawled. “In case you were wondering how she was after you whipped her into unconsciousness.”

Valentino winced. “I didn’t mean to,” he muttered. “She wasn’t supposed to find him like that.”

“Two weeks is an awfully long time for someone to be missing. You didn’t expect her to search for him?” Alastor asked airily.

“I had to learn how to solder,” Valentino protested. “And I didn’t know how to get you to listen to me. I only planned on using the pulse-thingy on him at first but I figured you’d rip that out of his back the moment you arrived - which you *did*. I... I needed time to think of something you couldn’t just *break*.”

“So you put a bomb in him?” Alastor asked cheerily. Too cheerily. What was going on? What had Alastor figured out?

...What had Valentino missed?

No, maybe he was just bluffing. Trying to knock Valentino off balance. Well, it wouldn't work.

"I did what I had to do so we could all be happy," Valentino said with a scowl. "You'll just have to learn to share."

Alastor's grin grew darker. "No, I don't think I will."

A hand closed around Valentino's throat, shoving him up against the door.

Shit!

Valentino tapped at random on the app. A long list of words and numbers showed on screen but it didn't matter because Alastor was a fossil and he wouldn't understand any of it either. Valentino's thumb hovered over one of the sets of numbers.

"Let me go or I'll activate it!"

Alastor laughed like he knew a secret and Valentino grimaced as the silhouette slipped its arms around him and dug its claws into his soft stomach.

Valentino tapped the screen and summoned the best performance of his acting career.

"Congratulations," he spat. "He's fucking dead."

Alastor stared at him then burst into fits of laughter. Even the silhouette began to laugh, silent as ever as it clutched its stomach and ran a hand through its messy hair.

Alastor's fingers remained clamped around Valentino's throat, even as Alastor wiped a tear from his eye.

"Bravo, my foul fellow! Vox was right. You really are a *moron*."

Valentino winced at the insult before dread weighed heavy in his chest and he swallowed. "...Don't believe me? Go see for yourself."

Alastor's smile sharpened. "Why? To give you time to escape?"

He'd fucked up.

How had he fucked up?

He'd thought of everything! Planned for everything!

How had it all fallen apart so *quickly*?

He reached frantically for his guns but the silhouette snatched them from him before he had a chance to aim.

Alastor trailed a claw down his cheek, humming in twisted pleasure at the rivulets of blood that cascaded down his violet skin.

"You stole a device from the very man you implanted it into," Alastor drawled. "A very *clever* man. Agreed to your terms a little too quickly, didn't he? I wonder *why*?"

Valentino's eyes widened as fear and nausea and regret rolled around his gut.

Alastor's frame began to stretch and twist and crack into something hideous.

"You've hurt him for the last time, insect," Alastor hissed as his claws tore through Valentino's wings. "Let's see what breaks when I pull *your* limbs off."

An agonised scream echoed through V-Tower before falling eerily silent.

Alastor licked the blood from his fingers as he returned to Vox's room. A little sour for his taste, but someone in Cannibal Town would appreciate the spoils of his latest fight.

If the last couple of hours could be considered a *fight*.

His gaze softened at the picture of Vox curled tightly around Velvette, both of them healed and *safe* as they slept.

Alastor tucked himself in behind Vox, wrapping his arms securely around his middle as he buried his face into the back of Vox's neck.

"He gone?" Vox whispered, apparently not as asleep as he first appeared.

Alastor nodded and pressed his lips to the thick scar on Vox's now opaque shoulder. "I'm sure Rosie will appreciate a special *delivery* tomorrow..."

Vox huffed in amusement.

"Gross," grumbled Velvette.

Silence settled between them.

“I can’t believe he’s gone,” whispered Velvette against Vox’s chest. Vox petted her hair.

“He’ll regenerate,” Alastor muttered. “Unfortunately.” He tightened his grip on Vox.

“He’s never been well-balanced and he’s always had a temper, but I never thought...”
Velvette trailed off then pulled back to frown at Vox. “Was he always like that with you?”

“Chopping me up is a new one,” Vox grumbled before he frowned. “But, uh... yeah. He’s been *possessive* for a while.”

“Vox... I’m not even sure he saw you as a person,” Velvette breathed. “He treated you like... like...”

“A machine,” Vox and Alastor said in unison.

“I knew it was bad,” Velvette whispered. “But I never thought it was *that* bad.” She reached up and traced two fingers over the thick scar on his shoulder. “How could he do all that and still claim to love you?”

“Because he’s insane,” grumbled Alastor.

Vox ignored him. “It’s... complicated. I hurt him too. Used his trauma against him. You were right - we were toxic to each other, but sometimes it was good and after fifty years, you fall into a routine. We were awful together but we convinced ourselves we needed each other, that no one else would understand us and we started to rely on that. So when Alastor came back and I started to realise that wasn’t quite true, I suppose Valentino panicked.”

“Because he needed you to need him,” Velvette said slowly.

Vox nodded. “I was his comfort blanket and for fifty years, he was mine. We knew everything about each other, so it was easier to just... stay together rather than trying to explain everything to someone else from scratch. Then Alastor came along and Valentino’s blanket was snatched away - in his eyes, by Alastor; a man he had always come second to. I almost feel sorry for him.”

Alastor splayed a hand over his bare stomach.

Vox scowled. “And then I remember that he forced me into a coma, chopped me into pieces, and stored me in boxes in his fucking *closet* for two weeks. Oh, and threatened to blow me up if I didn’t agree to sleeping with him.”

Alastor snorted as Velvette grimaced.

They fell quiet once more.

“What are we going to do with the porn studio?” Velvette whispered after a few minutes.

Vox sighed. “I don’t know.”

Alastor made a thoughtful sound. “I know a certain spider-demon that would *love* his own film set...”

Vox raised an eyebrow. “Angel Dust?”

“I’m sure he’ll be open to negotiations now that his contract with Valentino has... expired.”

“He is Val’s best actor,” mused Vox. “We could make a director of him...”

“What about you, Radio Demon?” Velvette asked quietly. “A position within the Vees has just opened up. You’re exactly the kind of Overlord we’re looking for.”

Vox tensed in Alastor’s grip. “Vel, don’t-”

“Don’t pretend you haven’t considered it,” scoffed Velvette. “I’ve seen your old shows. You guys used to work well together. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t enjoy having him around here more often?” She raised an expectant gaze to Alastor. “Well, old-timer?”

Alastor blinked placidly. “Let the dust settle first and then I may consider it. I have the hotel to take care of.”

Vox stiffened and Alastor could practically *hear* his anxious thoughts and memories - memories of a time he’d asked for Alastor to join him and the Radio Demon had refused.

“Breathe, my love,” Alastor whispered against Vox’s neck. “I’m right here.”

Vox exhaled slowly, body relaxing and Velvette watched with raised eyebrows.

She made a soft sound at the back of her throat as though she had just been struck by an epiphany of sorts, before she narrowed her eyes at Alastor.

“Break his heart and I’ll break your teeth.”

Alastor blinked in surprise then startled when he noticed his silhouette snickering above them on the headboard. He rolled his eyes and settled more comfortably against Vox’s back.

“My dear, I’m pretty sure Vox would break them himself.”

“No, he wouldn’t. He’d keep a picture of you beside his bed and cry every night over it for fifty years.”

“Fuck you,” Vox grumbled. “It wasn’t *every* night. Five out of seven.”

Velvette giggled and Alastor smirked into his neck.

“I would have done the same if you hadn’t stolen my picture,” Alastor drawled.

“Piss off.”

“And then you tore it up.”

“Kept the part with your face though, didn’t I? And Val tore it up.”

“You kept the part with his face so you could put a knife through it,” Velvette teased, quickly catching on.

“Don’t you start,” Vox grumbled.

Alastor popped his head over Vox’s shoulder. “Was he really *that* obsessed with me?” he drawled.

“He had a candlelit shrine to you,” Velvette said, smirking. “And a body pillow.”

Vox powered his screen down with a groan. “Again with the fucking body pillow. Where did that rumour come from?”

“He makes me wear a mask of your face sometimes. And he forced me to create an exact copy of your coat, which he sniffs during coffee breaks.”

Alastor bit back laughter as Vox held his middle finger in Velvette’s face even as he continued to cuddle her.

“He licks that radio you got him. It’s like watching a crack addict.”

“Fuck off,” Vox grunted.

Alastor grinned into Vox’s shoulder.

“He collects plastic toy deer and keeps them under his bed. He has a little herd of them. He’s painted one of them red and one of them blue,” Velvette continued.

Vox put a hand over Velvette’s mouth as she giggled.

“I’m feeling a little worried for my safety,” Alastor chuckled.

“Yeah, you might wake up in several boxes in my closet,” Vox said as he wrestled half-heartedly with Velvette. “Y’know, ‘cos I’m a fucking psychopath.”

Velvette managed to free her mouth. “Wait until I tell you about all the movies he’s edited your face into - my favourite was *Titanic*, with you as Jack and him as Rose.”

Vox threw a pillow over her face as she cackled and Alastor snickered before pressing an adoring kiss between Vox's shoulder blades and watching them struggle.

They were safe. Valentino wouldn't lay a hand on either of them again.

Alastor would make sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

You guys have no idea how much I was laughing reading your comments, knowing exactly how this chapter was going to go. Fun fact: this was going to be all one chapter, and then I thought 'nah, let's hit them with a cliffhanger!' ;)

Anyway, yeah, Val isn't as smart as he thinks, his plan had lots of holes, kudos to you clever cookies who immediately noticed it wouldn't work ;)

Chapter 48: A Pot Of Spicy Buttermilk Chicken

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Weeks turned into months and changes moved quickly. For Angel Dust, it was like Christmas had come early - his contract had ended, Valentino was gone, and he earned a promotion to director. He was *good* at it too - bright and enthusiastic and motivational and *tasteful* like Valentino had been in those early days. Watching him work made Vox's chest ache for a time long since passed.

But he didn't miss those early days so much anymore, because he and Alastor had made great strides these past months and things were *great*.

Really great.

They still had their shows to manage and Vox had VoxTek whilst Alastor had the hotel, but they were growing more and more comfortable dipping into each other's businesses, helping each other out and covering for each other when they needed to.

The running joke of Alastor never being seen on camera had made a return and Vox teased him about it both on air and off, and soon, their shows were full of so many in-jokes and playful barbs that sinners began to wonder if Alastor *had* joined the Vees.

He always refuted it, but he didn't exactly hide his blossoming relationship with Vox either, so no one was quite sure who was working for whom.

And then there was sweet Rosie. Sweet Rosie who, upon receiving the boxes of Valentino's dismembered body, had enlisted the help of Veltette to advertise her 'Lovebug treats' on all of social media. This did two things: 1) It gained Rosie some new customers, and 2) It

warned all of Hell not to trifle with Radio Demon, no matter what videos they might have viewed.

Velvette and Rosie got on like a house on fire despite the decades between their deaths and it turned out that Rosie had a taste for fashion, which delighted Velvette to no end. Vox hadn't seen her sketch this much in *years*.

However, whilst Vox and Alastor's professional relationship had definitely improved, along with their public appearance, it was the little moments of domestic bliss that had Vox's heart really racing. Those tender, affectionate moments that had no right to exist in Hell but did anyway because Vox and Alastor were genuinely *good* for each other. It had just taken *dying* to find each other.

Hands slid around Vox's stomach from behind as a nose nuzzled into his neck. "What is that ridiculous thing you're wearing?" Alastor drawled.

Vox snickered and wiggled his hips, his frilly pink apron swaying gently. "Like it? Velvette got it as a gag gift for my birthday years ago. Found it again last week."

Alastor ran a finger over the bow at his back. "You look fabulous, my dear," Alastor said drily.

Vox grinned and continued stirring the curry. Alastor watched him for a moment before his nose wrinkled. "What is that *awful* smell?"

Vox stayed very calm and didn't dare glance at the microwave. "Thought you liked buttermilk chicken?"

Alastor sniffed the air and glanced around the kitchen like a bloodhound. "What-" He suddenly frowned at Vox and sniffed the back of his neck. "Are you... Are you alright? It smells like... like *smoke*."

Vox stared at the chicken. “Oh?” he asked lightly. “Does it? I’m fine.”

Alastor’s gaze slid slowly to the microwave. “What did you do?”

“What do you mean?” Vox asked.

Alastor stalked towards the microwave and opened it, coughing at the blast of foul-smelling smoke that erupted from it. Once he’d stopped coughing, he stared at the bowl inside and slowly removed it.

“What... What is this?”

Vox coughed lightly. “Rice.”

Alastor scraped the solid black mass out of the bowl, holding it up at Vox in disbelief. “Rice?”

Vox lifted his head a little. “I *may* have overcooked it a tad.”

Alastor inspected the thick black disc for a moment before banging it against the edge of the bowl. It remained intact but it did emit a small cloud of ash.

“Vox, my love, this is a projectile.”

Vox stirred the chicken slightly faster. “Well, I was following the instructions on the back of the bag.”

“How long did you cook it for?”

“What?”

“How long did you put it in the microwave for?”

Vox bit his lip. “Twenty minutes.”

A long suffering sigh. “That’s for the whole bag.”

“Ok well, I know that *now*,” Vox muttered. “I knew that when I stopped being able to see through the cloud of smoke in the microwave.”

Alastor sighed again, pulled a pot out of the cupboard - and wasn’t it adorable that Alastor knew Vox’s kitchen so well? - before filling it with water and setting it on the induction hob.

“You are a fire hazard,” Alastor said, eying the pan of chicken to make sure Vox hadn’t burned that either. “How did you survive as a bachelor on Earth?”

Vox bit back a laugh. “I learned to really like toast.”

Alastor chuckled before sliding behind Vox once more as he waited for the pot of water to boil. “Cook your rice on the hob so you can keep an eye on it.”

“Yes, chef.”

Alastor nipped his neck. “Without the attitude or I’ll throw your ‘rice’ at your screen and see which breaks first.”

“Sorry, chef.”

Alastor flicked an antenna before settling against Vox’s back and falling quiet.

Vox’s grin softened. “Busy day?”

Alastor nodded, leaning a little heavier against Vox, trusting him to support him. “Pentious is in Heaven. Charlie is *thrilled*.”

Vox stilled. “Wait, what? He was redeemed? The hotel... The hotel actually *worked*?”

“You sound surprised. Was it not your idea in the first place?”

“Yeah but... I never thought it would be successful.”

“Neither did I,” confessed Alastor. “Charlie has posted a picture of her and the redeemed Sir Pentious all over social media. The hotel is fully booked.”

Vox blinked. “He came down to visit? That’s... great, Alastor. Congratulations.”

“It’s *exhausting*. ”

Vox frowned at the chicken and his voice grew quieter. “If you’re helping sinners to redeem themselves, you might be worthy of redemption too.”

Alastor squeezed Vox tightly, nuzzling into the back of his head. “My Heaven is right here.”

Vox's heart fluttered. "Sap," he teased.

Alastor splayed a possessive hand over his stomach. "Pour the rice in."

Vox smiled and did as directed, enjoying the sensation of Alastor plastered over his back.

Since the whole fiasco with Valentino where he had lost his sense of touch, Vox had noticed that he had become even more clingy. Thankfully, Alastor was all too happy to oblige him and Vox didn't even have to ask for Alastor to drape around him these days. Alastor was very open about touching him.

They had dinner together and talked about things that normal couples talked about and it was mundane and domestic and *perfect* and as they settled on the couch to read, Vox couldn't help but think how incredibly lucky he was.

He smiled as he studied Alastor's relaxed posture, coat and waistcoat hanging up somewhere and tie loose around his neck, top button undone... Damn, what had he done to deserve this man?

"Let me rub your feet?" Vox asked and Alastor peered over the top of his book.

"Hm?"

"Your hooves. Let me rub them. You still haven't fulfilled your end of our little deal."

Alastor huffed in amusement. "Do you have a foot fetish you haven't told me about?"

Vox chuckled and shook his head. "You've had a busy day. Let me rub your feet. It'll feel nice, I swear." He paused and smirked. "Unless you're ticklish?"

Alastor sighed with a smile and threw his feet onto Vox's lap. "Whatever keeps you happy, my dear." He returned his attention to his book.

Vox began working his shoes off. "Why do you wear shoes over your hooves? Doesn't that defeat the whole purpose? Also, how do you not tear through a pair of shoes every week?"

Alastor turned the page. "Reinforced soles. And bare hooves don't exactly match the suit."

Vox slid Alastor's socks off with a huff of amusement and lightly trailed his fingers from the tip of a digit to a fluffy ankle, then along the underside of the left foot. He toyed with one dew claw, then the other before pressing a thumb into the area between the dew claws and the main digits.

Alastor sank a little lower into the couch.

Vox grinned and manipulated one of the larger digits, testing its flexibility before doing the same with the other.

Alastor's eyes slipped shut.

Vox watched him fondly, one hand rubbing an ankle as the other flexed a digit and Alastor blinked slowly at him, a contented smile settling over his expression.

"Good?" Vox asked and Alastor nodded, huffing a sigh.

Vox pushed a finger deep into the tendons and ligaments between the two dew claws and Alastor spread his main digits wide, leaning into the pressure.

"Why did you want to make a deal about this?" Alastor asked curiously.

Vox chuckled. "I just wanted an excuse to see you relax. Thought you'd enjoy it."

Alastor shifted lower into the couch, placing his book on his stomach.

Vox watched him warmly and slid two fingers between his main digits, spreading them and massaging where fur met hoof. He pressed firmly at the area where both toes joined, pushing hard against taut tendons and ligaments.

Alastor moaned softly.

Vox blinked in surprise and glanced at his fingers to find them... greasy. No, not greasy, almost... creamy. He rolled the substance between his fingers - it was thin and smooth and it smelled strongly of musk and forests and rainfall and-

Vox pried the digits apart to reveal a small scent gland.

"Oh," he said and he glanced over at Alastor, noting that he seemed a little... embarrassed.

"It's... unconventional," Alastor said quietly.

So that was why he wore shoes. Vox pushed his thumb against the gland and Alastor sank into the couch once more with a soft groan.

"Is that... Is that like a turn-on for you, or...?" Vox asked carefully and Alastor chuckled and shook his head.

"It's extremely relaxing. Like a massage after a long workout."

Vox brightened, grabbed Alastor's other foot, and pressed his thumbs into both glands at the same time.

Alastor went boneless, a moan escaping him.

"Damn, Al... Why didn't you ask for this sooner if you enjoy it so much?"

"It's... Well, it's a little odd, isn't it? There's *discharge*."

"So what? Al, you know you can ask me for anything, especially the things you like. I love seeing you happy," Vox said softly as he rolled the glands around his thumbs.

Alastor shot him an adoring look before Vox's curiosity got the better of him and he licked a little of the fluid from his thumb. He raised his eyebrows.

"Fuck, you're delicious."

Heat rose to Alastor's cheeks. "Vox."

"I mean it," Vox chuckled as he continued his ministrations. "It's like a concentrated version of your scent."

"You're being disgusting." Alastor's cheeks were growing hotter, ears low and embarrassed.

"Says the cannibal."

Alastor swallowed but he flexed his toes and Vox could tell that he was rather enjoying himself.

“Hey, if you’re allowed to like my weird bits, I can like your weird bits too,” Vox said as he shifted to rub the dew claws of one foot.

Alastor’s shoulders relaxed.

Vox rubbed and massaged and manipulated Alastor’s feet for a little while before an idea came to him. He glanced over at Alastor, whose eyes were closed, ears at ease. He squeezed his deer’s ankle. “Stop me if you’re not comfortable,” he whispered.

Alastor cracked an eye open, watching Vox carefully shift them both until he was half facing Alastor and Alastor’s legs were bent at the knee. He cupped the bottom of Alastor’s foot, raising it slightly before he dipped his head and pressed his tongue against the gland.

Alastor’s breath hitched.

Vox closed his eyes, working the gland with his tongue slowly, lapping at the fluid leaking from it as he flexed and rubbed Alastor’s foot with his fingers and thumb.

“Fuck,” Alastor whispered and Vox glanced up to see the Radio Demon staring at him with wide eyes, flat ears, and-

And were his trousers *tented*?

Vox spread Alastor’s digits wider and sucked at the gland, keeping his gaze on the Radio Demon’s face.

Alastor swallowed.

Vox grinned. “Thought it wasn’t arousing?”

“It isn’t,” Alastor managed. “But the way you’re *hungry* for it...”

Vox’s grin widened. “So *I’m* the turn-on?” He smoothed his tongue over the gland and groaned at the heedy taste of musk. “You taste so fucking amazing.”

“*Vox.*”

Vox smirked at the horrified crack in Alastor’s voice and switched to the other foot, digging his thumb deep against the gland of the foot he had just dropped as he lifted the other and kitten-licked the new gland.

Alastor squeezed his eyes shut, moaning softly. “Vox, please.”

“Please what, gorgeous?” Vox murmured against his hoof before lapping at the gland like he was starving for it.

Alastor watched him, fingers curling into the couch cushions. “I want...”

Vox kissed the gland. “Tell me what you want, darling.”

Alastor snagged his shirt and dragged him up the couch and Vox laughed as he was tugged into a deep kiss. Hands clutched at his back and Vox settled on top of him, snaking his arms around his Radio Demon as they made themselves comfortable.

They lapped inside one another’s mouths, tongues sliding together, and Vox made a happy sound at the back of his throat when Alastor nipped his lip before making a show of sucking his tongue. It was no secret to either of them that Alastor enjoyed kissing - he was good at it too. Better than Val purely because Alastor’s kisses had genuine love and affection behind them.

Alastor's hands slid beneath his shirt, fingers dipping into the ports at his back and pulsing teasing bursts of static into them, and Vox quickly rose to the challenge, tugging Alastor's collar down to mouth and nip and suck at the curve of his neck. Alastor tipped his head to the side, breaths growing a little heavier as Vox worked a hickey into his skin.

Suddenly, Alastor fumbled with Vox's shirt buttons and Vox's breath hitched at the determination in his gaze. Alastor was quite worked up - a rare sight indeed.

Vox muttered a soft curse as Alastor sank his fingers into a set of vents, the others still playing with his ports as he peppered wet, open-mouthed kisses along some of the circuit tracks decorating his skin. He pushed Alastor gently back against the couch, easing him out of his shirt, and he sank onto Alastor's body again and snaked an arm around his back as his other hand fisted Alastor's hair the way he liked.

He mouthed at the fur on Alastor's chest, raising an eyebrow when he felt the Radio Demon's legs hook around his hips. He licked a stripe up Alastor's throat and nipped his jaw and Alastor captured his lips again, utterly devastating Vox's mouth.

Vox felt breathless as he pulled back, fans running faster and chest heaving. Alastor stared up at him, clearly flustered.

"Touch me," Alastor panted. "I want you to touch me."

"Where?" Vox croaked.

"Anywhere. Everywhere."

He curled his fingers tighter into Alastor's hair and let his other hand roam greedily over Alastor's hot chest, brushing through ruby fur and tracing scars before he carefully let his thumb graze a nipple.

When Alastor didn't squirm or protest, he did it again, slower, more deliberately.

Alastor's fingers curled deeper into his vents.

Vox pinched the nipple gently, then harder when Alastor pushed into his touch.

"More," Alastor breathed and Vox swallowed thickly before wrapping his lips around the perky nub and sucking.

A soft, breathy moan tumbled from Alastor's lips.

Vox laved his tongue over the nipple before shifting to the other one, and then he took it gently between his teeth, watching Alastor's head tip back against the arm of the couch.

"You're so fucking hot," Vox groaned before he sucked and nipped at the nub again, until it was swollen and tender and Alastor was twitching at every lick.

Vox watched his expression carefully for a moment. "Colour?"

"Green," Alastor said immediately. "Vox, please. Touch me. I want you to keep touching me. I need you."

Vox trailed messy, open-mouthed kisses down to his stomach, groaning when Alastor buried both hands into his vents. "*Fuck*, Alastor," he managed before he gripped Alastor's hips and worshipped his belly with kisses and lick and nips.

Alastor *whined* and quickly fumbled with his belt, and Vox watched in awe as the Radio Demon shimmied out of his trousers.

"I want more of that," Alastor demanded and Vox trailed kisses down his leg to his knee, before lapping and nipping up the inside of his thigh. He gave the other leg the same

treatment and Alastor's thighs began to tremble. Vox glanced at his face.

“Colour?”

“Green,” Alastor whispered. “More.”

Vox latched onto the inside of Alastor's thigh, lapping and kissing and nipping, pushing his legs wider and rubbing two fingers against the gland between his digits. Alastor arched elegantly, flexing his hoof as his thighs trembled and *oh, he was so hard. Look how beautiful he was.*

No longer able to reach his vents, Alastor caressed an antenna, dipping his other fingers into the ports at the back of Vox's head as he pulsed desperate, needy static into Vox in a steady rhythm.

Vox's trousers felt far too tight but he was too enraptured by Alastor's proudly tented black boxers to care to relieve the pressure. He thumbed circles into Alastor's hips and carefully nuzzled at his erection, keeping an eye on Alastor's expression.

Alastor inhaled sharply and snapped his head up to stare at Vox and for a moment, Vox froze, but Alastor didn't pull away.

Holding Alastor's gaze, Vox pressed a devoted kiss to the tip of his clothed dick then squeezed his hips in query. “Is this okay?” he whispered, voice thick with interference.

Alastor hesitated, staring at him for a moment before he nodded. “Again,” he breathed, voice equally as staticky.

Vox pressed another kiss to his dick, then another and another. He nuzzled at the soft material and worshipped it with kisses and Alastor's breaths were shaky and uneven as he watched.

“That good, darling?” Vox managed and Alastor nodded, looking rather overwhelmed.

Vox kissed the tip of his dick again and brushed two fingers along it.

Alastor’s ears flattened. “Yellow.”

Vox returned his hand to Alastor’s hip. “Sorry,” he mumbled, nuzzling the tented material once more.

Alastor swallowed and Vox noticed his ears were still flat. He was struggling, wrestling with his own emotions, overwhelmed by the intensity of it all.

Vox crawled up his body and peppered kisses over his face. “Easy,” he whispered. “Easy, Al. Do you want to stop?”

Alastor shook his head, then looked torn. “I... I don’t...” He frowned. “Damn it, I don’t know.”

Vox began to slide off him but Alastor gripped his arms.

“No! No, please. Don’t stop. I want...” Alastor pulled a face. “I want...”

“Tell me,” Vox whispered, brushing Alastor’s hair from his face.

Alastor’s cheeks darkened and he averted his gaze. “I want you to play with my nipples again,” he mumbled.

A slow grin worked its way across Vox’s face. “Anything else, my handsome buck?”

Alastor ducked his head at the praise. “Pet my tail?”

Vox pinched a nipple between his finger and thumb. “Anything else?” he purred as Alastor jerked into his touch.

“I... I want you to take your trousers off. I want to see...” He trailed off, heat creeping up his neck.

Vox squeezed his tail affectionately before kissing Alastor’s cheek and standing. He slid his trousers down, revealing strained red boxers.

Alastor’s ears perked upright. “...Are those... Are those mine?”

Vox winked. “Told you I’d be keeping them.”

Alastor’s tail wiggled as Vox climbed on top of him once more. “You actually wear them?”

Vox circled his finger around a nipple as his other hand slid beneath Alastor to toy with his fluttering tail. He nodded. “I like feeling like I belong to you.”

Alastor’s gaze softened and he pulled Vox in for a deep, unhurried kiss, slinging his arms around Vox’s back and humming in pleasure when Vox rolled his thumb over his sensitive nipple.

“You’re doing so well,” Vox breathed against his lips. “So fucking proud of you.”

Alastor’s fingers skated over his back, into ports and grazing vents before tentatively settling over the swell of his ass.

“I feel safe with you,” Alastor whispered and Vox kissed the corner of his mouth. “I... I enjoy *exploring* with you.”

Vox traced a scar that ran from Alastor’s pectoral up to his shoulder. “I want you to feel safe,” he murmured, fingers brushing along more scars. “You know you can ask me for anything, right? You never have to be afraid of telling me what you want or don’t want.”

Alastor slid his finger and thumb up and down the length of Vox’s undamaged antenna. He fluffed his tail and Vox threaded his fingers into the soft fur.

Alastor squeezed his ass and a soft moan tumbled from his lips as he instinctively rolled his hips against air. Alastor stilled and Vox’s screen tinted pink.

“Sorry,” he muttered before giving Alastor’s cheek a sweet kiss and his shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

Alastor tilted his head slightly and squeezed his ass again and Vox buried his face into the fur at Alastor’s chest. Damn it, he was so achingly hard. He could restrain himself though, as he always did around Alastor. In recent months, he had become a master at remaining *mostly* composed. At keeping Alastor comfortable through his curiosity.

His breath hitched when Alastor carefully hooked his legs around his hips and he looked up at the Radio Demon in query. Alastor swallowed and his hand slid from Vox’s ass around his front and over the tent in his boxers and a breathy gasp left Vox.

Alastor’s elegant fingers brushed over his cock, palm cupping him, stroking him slowly, gingerly, *wonderfully*.

Alastor’s ears flattened, brows drawing together and his jaw tightened a fraction before he suddenly slipped his fingers inside Vox’s underwear, closing them around Vox’s hard dick-

Vox quickly caught his wrist and tangled their fingers together as Alastor began to tremble. “Red,” Vox whispered.

Alastor squeezed his eyes shut, unwilling to meet Vox’s gaze.

“I should be able to do this,” he whispered, distressed static pinging against Vox’s skin. “I should be able to give you the pleasure you deserve. I should be able to give you *more* than this. It’s been *months*. ”

Vox rubbed his back comfortingly. “Stop. Just stop. I don’t need anything more from you, Al. I’m honoured you give me as much as you do.”

Alastor scowled at him, gaze a little misty. “I *want* to give you more. I want to give you everything. I want to be able to touch you and not feel fearful. I want the memories to *stop*. You aren’t them. You’ll never be them. Why can’t my body understand that?”

Vox released Alastor’s hand and swept a thumb over his cheek. “Al, you can’t force yourself to-”

Alastor grabbed Vox’s hand and thrust it between his legs angrily. “I’m hard,” he growled. “I’m fucking hard and I can’t even... I can’t let you touch me. I can’t let you have me.”

Vox quickly returned his hand to Alastor’s cheek. “You let me kiss you. You let me nuzzle you. Al, you *did* let me touch you.”

“For a few seconds,” snapped Alastor. “Through clothing! And then I... I froze up, *again*. ”

“It’s okay-”

“No, it isn’t!” Alastor hissed and a frustrated tear slid down his cheek. Vox swept it away with a frown. “I want to be better than this. I want to stop being *broken*. I want to stop being

weak and pathetic and-”

Vox settled heavily on top of Alastor to still his trembling and he pressed a long kiss to his forehead. “You are doing so well,” he whispered against Alastor’s skin. “Why are you trying to rush? Why are you pushing yourself past what you’re ready for? What more will you achieve if you do it now or in a year’s time?”

He petted Alastor’s back. “It’s going to feel more satisfying if you work yourself up to it slowly, because then there’ll be less fear and doubt and you’ll be able to enjoy it rather than it being a box that you’ve ticked.”

Alastor fell quiet, staring up at Vox with a frown. Vox smiled. “It’ll be better for me too, because I won’t have to worry that I’ve hurt you or triggered a memory.”

Alastor lowered his gaze, fingers curling into Vox’s back. “I’m worried I won’t ever get there,” he confessed.

“What changes if you don’t?” Vox asked gently. “I’ll still be here. I’ll love you the same.”

Alastor traced patterns over his back. “I feel... dirty.”

Vox frowned in confusion and Alastor grimaced at his expression.

“I feel... They used every inch of my body. The same in Purgatory. They *violated* every part of me and I feel... I feel like no matter how much I scrub, no matter how long it has been, I’ll always be able to smell them on me. I’ll always be able to feel their fluids on me, inside me... I’ll always be able to *taste* their release dripping down my throat and-”

He cut himself off and squeezed his eyes shut, another tear escaping him. Something furious and protective and bloodthirsty boiled in Vox’s stomach as he gently wiped the tear away with his thumb.

“I want you to fuck me because I want you to make me *clean* again,” Alastor whimpered. “I want to forget what they tasted like and smelled like. I want your hands to be the only ones I remember touching me, restraining me, spreading me, teasing at me.”

He looked up at Vox desperately. “If I never get there, they will *always* own my body. I’ll have killed them, but they’ll still *win*. I *need* you to fuck me. I need you to help me beat them.”

Vox blinked, mouth opening and closing for a moment before his shoulders slumped. “Al, that’s a lot to unpack...”

Alastor averted his gaze angrily. “I know. And I know how ridiculous it is. I know I can’t really taste them or smell them. I know they don’t *own* me. They probably barely think about me down here and yet I’m so fixated on those memories-” He cut himself off with a soft growl. “Forget it. I’m being *stupid*. You’re right. I don’t need you to put your fucking cock in my ass.”

He suddenly wriggled and pushed at Vox’s chest, startling him. “Get off me,” Alastor snapped and he shoved Vox to the end of the couch and stood, snatching his shirt and trousers and pulling them on, ears pinned to his skull.

Vox watched with wide eyes, heart racing with panic. He’d messed up. He’d upset Alastor somehow and now Alastor was angry with him and he would abandon Vox all over again even though everything had been going so well and-

Vox sprung to his feet and wrapped himself around Alastor from behind.

“Don’t leave,” he whimpered. “I’m sorry. Tell me what I did wrong? Tell me how to fix it? Just... don’t walk away again.”

Alastor sagged, head tipping forwards. “I’m not going anywhere,” he mumbled and Vox held him tighter, burying his face into the back of his neck. They stood in silence for a few

minutes before Alastor slowly turned around and slipped his arms around Vox's waist.

He pressed their foreheads together, pulsing waves of reassuring, apologetic static between them.

"I'm tired of being controlled by this," Alastor murmured. "I'm tired of the nightmares and how I flinch when other people touch me. I'm tired of it affecting my relationship with you."

Vox was silent for a few moments, mulling the words over, studying Alastor's unhappy smile.

"You need me to wash their touch off you? I can do that," Vox said quietly. "I can make you clean again, Alastor."

Alastor shivered and pressed closer, breath hitching when Vox slowly began to undress him again. Vox led him to the couch, pushing him onto it gently and kissing down his chest and over his stomach. He kissed and nipped along Alastor's thighs, wedging his thumb up against a scent gland in his hoof, and his kisses travelled down to fluffy ankles before starting at the bottom of the opposite leg and working their way back up.

He bypassed Alastor's underwear, following scars as his fingers skated over Alastor's sides and stomach, brushing through the soft red treasure trail of fur that dipped below his waistband, and he lapped and sucked greedily at Alastor's nipples until Alastor made a soft sound of pleasure.

"Vox..."

Vox's mouth followed the line of fur that led to his boxers and he kissed Alastor's cock once, twice, before hooking his fingers behind a knee and tossing Alastor's leg over his hip. He stretched up Alastor's body, sliding their chests flush and he captured Alastor's lips hungrily, smirking when Alastor wrapped his other leg around his waist.

“Relax,” Vox whispered as he laced their fingers together and snaked his other arm possessively around Alastor.

Alastor’s ears pulled upright and curious and Vox smiled before gently rolling his hips against Alastor’s.

Alastor tensed and Vox slowed his pace.

“Easy. Nothing more is going to happen,” Vox whispered. “Just this. Tell me what you can feel.” He squeezed Alastor’s hand.

Alastor’s body was stiff and unmoving. “...Your cock against mine.”

Vox shook his head. “It isn’t though, is it? There’s soft cotton and cool silk between us. There’s heat between our chests and your fur is tickling my skin. There’s a pressure around my waist from your thighs and I can feel the rise and fall of your stomach against mine with every breath.”

Alastor blinked and Vox squeezed him affectionately. “Tell me what you can hear.”

Alastor’s ears twitched. “...Your fans. And the buzzing of your electronics.”

Vox released Alastor’s hand to cup his cheek. “What else?”

“...My own breaths and the rhythm of my heart.” His ears flicked again. “I can hear the sound of your skin sliding against mine and the rustling of my fur.”

“What can you smell?”

Vox felt Alastor's tail give a slight wiggle.

"You. I can smell copper and salt and ozone. You smell... fresh. Clean."

Vox hummed. "What else? Can you smell yourself on me?"

Alastor pushed his nose into Vox's neck. "I can smell sweat. And... and musk and- yes. Yes, I can smell myself on you. All over you."

"I fucking love that smell," Vox whispered beside Alastor's ear as he ground a fraction harder against Alastor. "I love how we smell together. What can you taste?"

Alastor caught his screen and pulled him into a slow, filthy kiss. When he pulled back, he smirked coyly at Vox's reddened screen.

"Buttermilk chicken," he drawled.

Vox tightened his grip on Alastor, tangling his fingers in his hair as he rutted a little faster.

"What can you see?"

Alastor's gaze softened and he trailed a finger down the edge of Vox's screen as he splayed a possessive hand over his back. "The man I love."

"Is he handsome?" Vox teased and Alastor chuckled.

"Enough to be a television star."

Playful static danced between them and Vox kissed Alastor's nose, earning a full tail wiggle.

He gave a particularly deep roll of his hips and Alastor's eyes widened. "Oh!"

Vox grinned. "What do you feel now?"

Blood rushed to Alastor's cheeks. "That was... pleasant."

"Why?"

Alastor shot him a distressed look and Vox's grin widened. "Come on, Al. Tell me why. What can you feel?"

"...An ache. Between my legs. It aches incredibly so, but then there's *you*. There's heat and... pressure. A lot of pressure. And... *friction* from the cotton. Then the pressure changes and-"

Vox shifted from slow thrusts to humping Alastor's hard dick.

A long moan tumbled from Alastor's throat and Vox was pleased to feel him relaxing, muscles loosening. He petted Alastor's hair.

"Well done," he praised. "What else do you feel?"

"Your fingers in my hair. I like your fingers being in my hair," Alastor said, voice less stilted and filters beginning to fall away to reveal his natural voice. "Your frequency is so comforting, my dear. And your static... Nothing makes me feel more at ease than when I feel your static against my skin, against my very *being*. You understand me like no other person ever has..."

Vox smiled fondly and stroked Alastor's spine. "You're being so good for me. Think you can open those beautiful eyes so I can look at you?"

Alastor stared up at Vox, breaths coming heavier. Vox swept a thumb over his parted lips and Alastor nipped at the pad.

"Damn, you're perfect," Vox breathed as he ground harder against Alastor, breath hitching when Alastor began teasing at the ports at his spine, his other hand curling around the back of his neck.

His thighs squeezed tighter around Vox's waist, drawing him deeper and Vox fisted his hair, tugging gently and kissing Alastor hard on the lips.

Alastor's frequency nestled against his and teasing, playful static grew desperate and possessive as it blanketed them both.

Their tongues slid together and Alastor swallowed Vox's soft moan and suddenly, Alastor's shadows were sliding around them both, holding them tightly to each other, ghosting over *all* of Vox's ports, and when Alastor began rocking his own hips against Vox's, the Television Demon let his electricity slide into Alastor - a low voltage, not enough to hurt but enough to *excite*, enough to send Alastor's pulse racing with a thrill.

Alastor's head tipped back with a curse and his shadows filled Vox ports before sliding deep into his vents, and Vox groaned loudly as he increased the current a fraction. Alastor arched into him with a whine of pleasure and Vox dipped his head to lap at Alastor's nipple.

"Vox!" Alastor begged, filters off.

"Fuck, you have such a sexy voice," growled Vox before Alastor dug his fingers hard into his ports and Vox's hips snapped forwards as he moaned.

Alastor made a choked noise and Vox stilled, looking down as Alastor's underwear grew damp.

Vox's breaths were ragged.

"Touch yourself," Alastor whispered, eyes closed as heat crept up his neck. "Let me hear you."

Vox slipped a hand into his boxers, stroking himself as he raked his gaze over Alastor's messy hair and sweat-slicked chest and heavy breathing and sticky underwear-

He buried his face in the fur at Alastor's chest and choked out a moan as he came, the lights in the room dimming for a second.

After a minute, he swallowed thickly, wiped his hand inside his boxers so Alastor wouldn't have to see anything, and began to peel himself off Alastor.

Alastor suddenly grabbed him and pulled him back down, snuggling into him like he was an oversized blanket. With their powers receding, Vox wrapped his arms tightly around Alastor, silence falling between them as they recovered.

"I love you," Alastor whispered, burying his face into Vox's chest as his muscles tightened.

Vox rubbed his back. "I love you too. You were so good."

Alastor relaxed and Vox smiled. "How do you feel?"

"...Good."

“You sure? Anything else? Come on, Al, this is important.”

“...Embarrassed,” Alastor said slowly. “Perhaps a little... ashamed.” He looked up at Vox apologetically and Vox rolled them onto their sides, trapping Alastor against the back of the couch as he continued to rub his back.

“You’ve nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed about,” Vox whispered. “You were incredible. Look at you... Look at how much you let me do. Al, that’s *amazing*.”

Alastor pressed his face into Vox’s chest again. “...Thank you, Vox.”

Vox held him close. “Be proud of yourself. You’ve come so far from the guy who wouldn’t even let me hold his hand.”

Alastor smiled tentatively into his chest and melted against him.

Vox rubbed his back and kissed his hair and sighed happily. In a few minutes, he would encourage Alastor to rise and clean up with him, but for now, he would bask in their shared warmth and contented static, and be proud of his brave and gorgeous buck.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Things get heated between Al and Vox. Also towards the beginning, Vox plays with Alastor's feet/hooves - if that's a squick for anyone? I don't know if I have to warn about that.

This is the transition into the next section of the story, so brace yourselves! Things are going to get ugly...

Chapter 49: Cracked Screens And Crumpled Roses

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Alastor had developed a Pavlovian response to Vox entering a room.

It was subtle enough that those around him hadn't noticed, but Alastor couldn't stop the phenomenon, and he was pretty sure that Vox had caught on.

And unfortunately, so had Rosie.

"Sorry I'm late," said Vox as he stepped into the back room of the emporium. "Interview ran over." He smiled charmingly and revealed a box of chocolates.

"Chocolates for the lady - with mouse heart centres," he drawled as he offered the box to Rosie. "*And...* a rose for the gentleman."

Alastor's ears pricked up at Vox's arrival and his tail wiggled beneath his clothes. Rosie stifled a giggle behind her dainty hand and Vox's smile grew a fraction wider before he revealed a small red rose encased in glass. The flower was surrounded by vibrant moss and dark green leaves, highlighting the brilliance of the ruby petals. Alastor tilted his head curiously.

"An eternal rose," Vox said softly. "Because my love for you will never wither."

Heat blossomed across Alastor's face as he glanced at Rosie. "Vox," he muttered, filled with a confusing combination of affection and embarrassment.

Vox chuckled and pressed the gift into Alastor's hands. "Oh, our resident matchmaker doesn't mind!" He squeezed Alastor's shoulder as he took the seat beside him. "Afterall, I paid her for it."

Alastor raised an eyebrow at the slyly grinning Rosie.

"This picturebox of yours is quite the romantic, y'know?" Rosie said. "If you want my opinion, you should hang onto him."

"Sound advice," Alastor murmured as he studied the rose before gingerly lacing his hand with Vox's. Vox beamed at him and Alastor's heart set off fluttering.

"Oh I'm so *proud* of you both!" Rosie gushed. "I'm so pleased you two are getting along again - that you're not dancing around each other like you were all those years ago. Happiness looks good on you."

Vox rubbed his thumb over Alastor's knuckles before he brightened. "Oh! Vel said to tell you that she's nearly finished with your new coat."

Rosie clasped her hands together excitedly. "How marvelous! That partner of yours is something special. You tell her she's welcome over for tea and cake - or those frothy coffees she likes so much - any time she wants to gossip."

Alastor smiled as he watched Vox relax into his chair. He took better care of himself these days, Alastor had noted. There were times when he still overworked himself and Alastor had to coax him into bed, but he spent more time on himself and on Alastor and he had come to learn that he could trust his employees with the jobs he had hired them to do without having to oversee everything.

His smile was brighter too, which was lovely. And that old playfulness had returned.

As conversation progressed to the latest pointless Overlord meeting, Alastor found himself sneaking closer to Vox and leaning against his side. As predicted, Vox immediately wound an arm around his waist even as he continued to chatter and gesticulate enthusiastically with his spare hand.

They both had their fair share of nightmares and last night was Vox's turn. He had woken up in the middle of the night, panting and shaking, fans on their highest setting as he clutched at his own body and checked it for sutures before gripping the sheets in a panic as he tested whether he could still feel them.

Alastor had come to learn that in these moments, Vox needed touch rather than comforting words and he had sleepily slid on top of Vox, eased him out of his shirt, and rubbed the scars encircling his shoulders as he rested his head atop his chest.

The effect was immediate. Vox held him tight, buried his face in his hair and grounded himself with the weight and sensation of Alastor's body on top of his. No words were spoken and they didn't need to be, because Vox dozed off shortly after and Alastor tumbled into unconsciousness with him.

Usually, Alastor would spend the following morning touching and reassuring Vox any way he could, but Vox had rushed off to his meeting after a quick breakfast and this was the first time Alastor had seen him since.

He placed a hand on Vox's knee, squeezing gently, and Vox nudged their knees together as his fingers curled possessively around Alastor's waist.

Alastor was once again struck by how infatuated he was with the Television Demon. Vox barely had to do anything to set his heart off racing these days. He glanced at the eternal rose in his hand, smoothing his thumb reverently over the delicate glass casing.

How lucky he was to have this man in his afterlife again.

Suddenly, there was a tightness at his neck and Alastor was dragged the full width of the room, slamming against the wall as glass shattered beneath him. He dropped onto his hands

and knees, tearing them on the glass fragments.

Vox and Rosie launched after him, helping him upright and brushing the broken shards of Vox's gift off his bloody skin.

The rose lay crushed beneath Alastor's foot and he frowned at it, heart aching for a moment before he touched his throat shakily.

He caught Vox's terrified gaze.

"No," Vox said, shaking his head desperately and he splayed a protective hand over Alastor's lower back as another curled around his arm, tugging him closer. "No, we're happy. We're fucking happy. She can't just- She's been gone for so *long*."

Rosie looked almost as upset as Vox was. She guided them both to their seats once more, but her hands shook and she couldn't seem to find any words.

When Alastor attempted to sit, Vox pulled him into his lap instead, holding him tight and pressing his screen against his shoulder.

Alastor realised he was trembling, ears pinned to his skull. "I don't want to lose this," he whispered, static building in the air with his mounting distress. "I- I *can't* lose this again."

Vox tightened his grip.

Fear and heat prickled at Alastor's skin. "Vox, I... I don't think I can do this. I can't face her again. What if she possesses me? What if she makes me hurt you? What if she *takes* you, or- or takes me and I never get to see you again?" He ran a hand through his hair, eyes going wide as his silhouette slipped free, looking distraught and a little wild as it latched onto Vox. Nausea rolled around Alastor's stomach as the anxiety built within him. "What if she hurts Rosie or Velvette or- What if she forces us to do the trials? What if-"

Vox's hands splayed over his chest and stomach as he pressed a long kiss to Alastor's ear. "We'll figure it out," he whispered. "I promise."

"What if we can't?" Alastor breathed. "What if this is all we get? What if she takes everything away?"

Vox kissed his ear again. "Then we'll fucking fight to get it back, just like we did before. Just like we always do."

Panic and grief threatened to drown Alastor, and he pressed back into Vox desperately, pushing his head under his screen, curling his fingers around Vox's arm, frantically trying to squeeze closer, to touch, to *hold on*.

He could feel Vox trembling beneath him. He was afraid, just as Alastor was.

"I think now would be a good time for you boys to talk to Lucifer," Rosie said quietly, worriedly.

"He won't help us," Alastor said lowly. "Things would be easier for him if we were gone."

"Then get Charlie on your side," said Rosie. "You said he'd do anything for his daughter."

Alastor pressed his lips together and glanced at Vox, who raised an eyebrow. Alastor sighed.

Vox licked his lips. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Alastor's ears drooped and he held Vox tighter, refusing to grace the comment with a reply.

The room was silent save for the soft, comforting buzz of Vox's electronics.

Alastor trailed open-mouthed kisses over the thick scars encircling Vox's shoulders and neck, and Vox stroked his back and threaded his fingers through Alastor's hair. Alastor smoothed a hand over Vox's chest, tracing over older scars - scars that he had caused, scars that he would never forgive himself for.

Alastor's shirt lay loose and open and Vox peeled him out of it with a frown, fingers exploring Alastor's own scars. Their lips met in a gentle collision and Vox tugged Alastor on top of him, trapping him against his chest.

"It'll be okay," he whispered against Alastor's lips, but his fingers curled into red hair as he said it. "Tomorrow, we'll talk to Charlie and she'll convince Lucifer to help us and... and everything will be okay."

"You believe that as much as I do," Alastor murmured, one hand sliding possessively around Vox's hip.

"We can at least try."

"And if it isn't enough?"

Vox kissed Alastor hard and frantic. "It will be. It has to be. We've come too far for this to be all we get."

Alastor nipped at Vox's lip before kissing his neck. Vox trailed his fingers down Alastor's spine, digging his knuckles into a knot just above his tail. Alastor canted his hips, tail attempting to stand upright.

He unbuckled his belt and slid his trousers off and Vox watched him in surprise.

“I want to feel you,” Alastor growled against his neck. “I want to touch you.” He unzipped Vox’s trousers and Vox’s eyes widened before he quickly wriggled free and pulled Alastor flush with him once more with a relieved groan.

Alastor straddled him, wrapping his arms around his back and lying flat against his chest as he buried his face into Vox’s neck. He wanted to feel Vox against him. He wanted to breathe in his comforting scent and bask in the warmth between their chests. He wanted to feel Vox’s arms around him, fingers curling against his bare skin. He wanted to feel Vox’s hips between his thighs, their legs tangled together, both of them *safe* and *loved*.

Vox’s arm tightened around him as his other hand fisted his hair and Alastor blew out a shaky breath as he slipped his fingers into Vox’s ports.

“I don’t want to lose this,” Alastor whispered into his neck. “I’ve only just got you back.”

Vox pulsed affectionate, adoring static between them.

Alastor shifted to kiss him, deep and slow and tender, and Vox melted beneath him, carding his fingers through the fur of Alastor’s tail.

Suddenly, Vox pulled back a fraction and fixed Alastor with a frown. “I need you to promise me you won’t push me away this time. We do this *together*, Alastor, no matter what she throws at us. No *‘trying to protect each other’*. We’re better together. We’ve always been better together.”

Alastor’s ears lowered. “Vox-”

“Promise me,” Vox growled. “We’re not facing her alone this time. We stick together.”

Alastor studied Vox's screen for a long moment before he nodded and caught the edge in his palm. "Fine. But you must promise me that if you end up in Purgatory alone, you will ask for me before starting the trials."

Vox blinked, tensing beneath him. "No."

Alastor gripped the edge of his screen with a scowl. "Promise me, Vox."

"I'm not dragging you into that Hell, Alastor! I'm not sentencing you to more misery and suffering! I won't be the reason you die up there in the dark, in *pain* and anguish and- and-"

"We stick together until the very end," Alastor said. "Promise me, Vox. Promise me that you won't face those trials alone if it comes to that."

Distress flooded Vox's face before he closed his eyes and nodded. He squeezed Alastor's tail before skating a hand over his back, feeling, *memorising*.

Alastor arched into his palm before nipping his lips and slipping a hand around the back of his neck. He lapped into Vox's mouth and pushed his fingers deeper into ports and swallowed Vox's soft moan of pleasure.

He loved Vox's happy noises. He wanted his picturebox to be happy. Vox deserved it after everything he had been through. He deserved love and affection and kindness. He deserved to be taken care of, to be worshipped and adored and doted on and- *and fuck*, what if this really was it? What if these were their last moments together? What if Roo took one of them or- or *destroyed* one of them and this was the last time Alastor would feel Vox beneath him? Warm and alive and beautiful and *his* and-

Alastor kissed Vox harder, more urgently, and Vox kissed back like he was starving for it. He tugged Alastor's hair gently and Alastor sent a wave of needy static through his ports before sliding his fingers from Vox's neck to his chest, thumb brushing an LED strip.

Vox pulled back breathlessly, fans flicking on as he swallowed. “Tell me what you want, Al.”

“You,” growled Alastor. “I want you. If this is all we get, then I want... I want you to...” He trailed off, frowning, before grinding his hips against Vox’s. He smirked when Vox’s eyes fluttered shut at the friction against his half-mast dick. Vox was so *sensitive*...

“I want you to make me yours,” Alastor breathed against his lips.

“This isn’t the end,” Vox croaked. “We aren’t giving up that easily. We’re going to fight. We’re going to fucking *win*.”

Alastor’s ears perked up and he raised his eyebrows at the arousal pooling between his legs. “She’s powerful. Far more powerful than either of us.”

Vox tugged his hair a little harder in reprimand and gripped his hip tightly, *possessively*, forcing Alastor to grind deeper against him. “We’re going to beat her,” Vox growled. “We deserve our happy ending after all the *shit* we’ve been through.”

Heat flared in Alastor’s belly at the determination in Vox’s tone and he slid his hands over the scars on Vox’s shoulders and pushed himself higher, arching his back so he could admire Vox from above.

“And if she tortures us? If she uses our past against us? Manipulates us? Pits us against one another?”

Vox caught on quickly, gripping both of Alastor’s hips and thrusting up against him. “We know each other better than that now, don’t we? Her games won’t work because I know every fucking inch of you, Alastor. I know your hopes and fears just as you know mine.”

Alastor’s tail stood to attention and Vox grabbed it, pulling at it greedily. Alastor’s head tipped backwards, fingers digging into Vox’s shoulders.

“We trust each other,” Vox continued. “She can say what she likes, torture us however she wants, but she’ll never turn us against each other again because we love each other too fucking much.”

Alastor *ached* for Vox. His heart felt so full for the man.

“Say it,” demanded Vox as he tugged Alastor’s rutting hips tighter against him. “I want to hear you say it. I *deserve* to hear you say it.”

Alastor squeezed Vox’s shoulders. “I love you.”

“Again,” growled Vox. “Look me in the fucking eye, Alastor, and make me believe it.”

Alastor’s gaze snapped to Vox’s face, the need and desperation between his legs growing at the Television Demon’s narrowed eyes.

“I love you,” breathed Alastor. “I love your determination and your possessiveness and your faith and loyalty to me.” He humped the bulge in Vox’s underwear. “And I love how damn hard you are for me.”

Vox dragged him into a filthy kiss that had Alastor panting, desperate for more.

“Fuck me,” Alastor whined against Vox’s lips. “Please, my love. Make me yours.”

Vox inhaled sharply before kissing Alastor again and carefully easing his underwear down. Alastor’s breaths shook a little, but Vox stroked his back, giving him time to adjust to the cool air.

After a few moments, he slipped his own underwear off and suddenly, Alastor could feel every inch of Vox.

He stilled.

“Breathe,” Vox whispered against his lips. “You’re safe. You’re with me. This goes at your pace and if you say *stop*, we stop.”

Alastor relaxed and Vox grazed his lips with an encouraging kiss. His fingers skated over Alastor’s back. “What can you feel?”

Alastor swallowed and settled flush against Vox. “Your heat. The shallow tracks in your skin. The softness of your lips despite the hardness of your screen - how do you do that?”

Vox smiled against his mouth. “Magic, sweetheart. What else can you feel?”

Alastor licked his lips. “...Your cock against mine.”

“And how does it feel?”

Alastor shifted his hips a little and Vox continued to trace soothing patterns over his back, one hand still curled possessively around his hip, which was *wonderful*.

“It’s... hard. Warm,” murmured Alastor.

Vox kissed his lips again in praise. “Well done.” Alastor’s tail wiggled and Vox’s smile widened before his hand shifted from Alastor’s hip to curl around both of their cocks. He stroked them both slowly, leisurely. “How does that feel?”

Alastor's cheeks burned and he closed his eyes. "Good," he mumbled.

"Why?" Vox coaxed.

"...Friction," Alastor whispered. "Pressure. Heat."

Vox dragged his thumb over the heads of both their dicks and Alastor buried his face into Vox's neck, fingers curling into the ports in his back. Vox let out a soft groan and splayed his hand over Alastor's back as he stroked them both.

"You feel so good, Al," Vox breathed. "Can't stop thinking about you. Want you all the time. Want to be close to you and hold you and just... *talk* to you. You make me feel safe and I love that you trust me. I still can't believe you let me touch you, that you kiss me and love me and... *fuck*, look at you, Al. Look at how incredible you are. Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

Alastor nuzzled into his neck as Vox squeezed gently at their cocks.

"Do you want to see?" Vox whispered into his ear after a few moments. "Do you want to see what we look like together?"

Alastor hesitated before nodding and he shifted slightly and trailed his gaze to where their dicks were pressed together, settled snugly in Vox's fist.

Alastor's eyes widened in surprise. "You're... glowing."

"Neat party trick, huh?" Vox grinned lop-sidedly but there was uncertainty in his gaze borne from decades of humiliation from Valentino.

Alastor relaxed against him, watching curiously as their cocks slid together. Vox was... surprisingly pretty. Alastor had expected something dark and fleshy and *crude*, but Vox's dick

glowed a dim cyan, growing brighter when he increased the pressure, as though lit from within. He was unlike anything Alastor had witnessed before.

And that was *brilliant*, because this Vox was an entirely different person to the Vox in Purgatory, and he bore no resemblance to the men from that night.

He nipped and sucked at Vox's neck and rutted gently into his fist, pleasantly surprised at how *comfortably* Vox's dick nestled against his.

"Fuck," Vox said shakily as he stroked them both a little firmer and threaded his fingers into Alastor's hair. "That's it, darling. Do what makes you feel good."

"Want to make you feel good too," Alastor whispered into Vox's neck as his fingers crept into a set of vents, his other hand squeezing Vox's ass curiously.

Vox arched into him with a soft groan. "You do, Al. You make me feel so fucking good."

Alastor glanced between them to watch Vox's cock weep gently over his. He tilted his head curiously and changed the angle of his thrusts until their balls brushed together. Vox immediately tipped his hips until they bounced against each other.

Even his balls glowed dimly.

Alastor hummed, eyes slipping shut as he enjoyed the sensation of Vox's pre-release slicking them both. "You're very pretty, my dear."

Vox's rhythm faltered before he pressed a frantic kiss to Alastor's ear. "Says the one with a cute little patch of cherry fur above his dick. Damn it, Al, how am I supposed to keep my hands off you when you keep revealing all these fun facts about yourself?"

Alastor's tail fluffed and wagged at the praise before lifting upright in anticipation of what was to come. He kissed Vox's neck sweetly. "I want to feel you come inside me," he whispered.

Vox blue-screened. Then he shook his head and drew in a shaky breath. "Okay. Cool. That's... cool. Yeah. Okay." He paused, clearly collecting his thoughts. "How, uh... How do you want to do it? Do you want to ride me or do you want me to get on top, or, uh...?"

Alastor hesitated. He hadn't really thought about it. "I'm not sure," he admitted, heat creeping to his neck. He had never been asked that question before. In the past, he had never been given a choice.

Vox kissed his ear again. "It's easier on you if you get on all fours, but I don't know if that's something you want to try just yet?" He petted Alastor's hair. "You won't be able to see me."

Alastor's ears lowered a fraction and he shook his head. "I need to see you," he murmured as he held Vox a little tighter.

"Want me to get on top?" Vox asked quietly. "Let you relax? Focus on how it feels?"

Alastor considered the options and nodded, and Vox released their cocks in favour of carefully rolling Alastor onto his back and spreading his legs apart.

Alastor's eyebrows drew together ever-so-slightly but he was distracted by Vox summoning a tube of chocolate flavoured lube.

He bit back a laugh as Vox wiggled his eyebrows and sucked a drop off his finger. He immediately curled his mouth in disgust and Alastor snickered.

"Strawberry one's better," Vox muttered before he smeared his dick with the substance and squirted another generous helping over his fingers.

“Do you regularly snack on such nutritious delicacies?” Alastor drawled.

“All the time,” Vox said without missing a beat. “Brush my teeth with them too.”

Alastor huffed another laugh and Vox smiled, squeezing his thigh affectionately. “Love that laugh,” Vox sighed happily, stroking Alastor’s thigh. “Al, I’m so fucking proud of you.”

Alastor’s gaze softened as he gazed adoringly at his beloved picturebox. “I’m all yours, my dear.”

Vox blew out a loaded breath before dipping his head to kiss between Alastor’s thighs. Then, he shifted to Alastor’s hard cock, kissing up the shaft and lapping at the head before wrapping his lips around it and swallowing him down to the base.

Alastor inhaled sharply, fingers digging into the sheets before Vox bobbed his head and Alastor let out a low moan. Vox sucked and licked and hummed around Alastor’s dick and when Alastor was throbbing and arching, on the verge of coming down Vox’s throat. Vox pulled off him with a smirk and Alastor sent him a wild-eyed look.

“Please,” he begged.

Vox chuckled. “Please what?” he purred before he teased a lubricated finger around Alastor’s asshole and slipped it inside.

Alastor’s tail flashed in panic, eyes switching to dials as his antlers elongated and distressed static cracked the air.

“I didn’t think he’d be able to take two of us. He’s so fucking tight!”

“Look how hard he is. You like that, you filthy little slut?”

Alastor squeezed his eyes shut, tears streaming down his face as his hair was yanked, pulling his head back at an uncomfortable angle. His ass burned and his cock ached and he was disgusted by his own vile arousal.

A hand wrapped around his throat as the third man forced into his mouth and Alastor could do nothing as he was used, bile crawling up his throat when fingers pumped his cock roughly until he came.

He kicked out at his attackers, using his hooves to his advantage, and he scrambled further up the bed, chest heaving and teeth bared, before he recognised the pillows as his own.

His heart jumped into his throat when he noticed Vox holding his screen.

His *cracked* screen.

“Shit,” Alastor breathed in horror before darting towards him. He reached for Vox’s screen, stomach rolling when Vox instinctively flinched away from him.

They stared at each other with wide eyes before Vox slowly lowered his hand to reveal the damage to his screen.

Alastor ran his fingers through his hair, breaths growing fast and shallow. “Vox, I- I’m sorry, I-”

“It’s alright,” Vox said softly and he took Alastor’s hands into his own. “It was an accident.”

Alastor slid out of Vox’s grip and cradled his screen gently, murmuring a familiar chant and repairing the damage he had caused. Vox’s shoulders relaxed and he cupped Alastor’s cheek

when he began to tremble.

“Shit,” Alastor said before burying his head into his palms and digging his nails into his scalp as his ears pinned to his skull. “Why can’t I do this?”

He tensed, trembles worsening. “Why can’t I fucking do this?” he snarled again, angry and upset and *ashamed*. He had hurt Vox. *Again*. “You deserve so much more than this! I’m no better than that foul moth! I keep hurting you! Abusing you! At least Valentino could give you his body - I can’t even give you *that!*”

“Alastor-”

“You’re supposed to be able to trust me, yet I keep *breaking* you! I can’t even warn you!”

“Al-”

“You’re *afraid* of me and you have every damn right to be!”

Vox cupped both of Alastor’s cheeks between his palms, forcing him to meet his gaze. “It was an accident,” Vox said firmly. “It’s okay, Alastor. I promise.”

Alastor curled his fingers around Vox’s wrists, body shaking violently as his gaze glazed with unshed tears. “I’m sorry,” he choked out, suddenly overwhelmed by grief and shame and frustration.

Vox frowned. “Can I hold you?”

“I might hurt you,” said Alastor bitterly as he lowered his gaze. “It’s all I seem to do.”

He was carefully pulled into Vox's body, arms sliding around his middle as a screen propped itself atop his head. Alastor dug his own nails into his knees, afraid of touching Vox.

"You're nothing like Val," Vox whispered after a few moments. "You *care* when you hurt me. You apologise. And you don't actually mean to hurt me. It's always an accident. An instinct created by something traumatic from your past." Vox kissed his hair. "And I only flinched away because of *my* past. I'm not afraid of you, Al. I've got no reason to be afraid of you."

"I broke your screen."

"And you immediately fixed it. You apologised. You didn't mean to do it."

Alastor scowled at his own knees, huddling in on himself further.

Vox kissed a flattened ear. "*This* is what love is," Vox whispered. "Supporting each other through the bad parts, not just the good. We don't give up or push each other away over something like this. We comfort and reassure each other and we find something that works for both of us."

"I don't think there is anything that *works* for me," said Alastor bitterly. "All I seem to do is lash out."

Vox rubbed his back. "You enjoyed me sucking your dick."

Alastor grimaced and dropped his gaze. "I can't *give* you anything though. All I can do is *take*. Sometimes I can't even do that. I don't... I don't want to be another Valentino to you."

Vox peppered kisses over his head and down to his cheek. "You could never be like him." He nipped Alastor's jaw playfully. "Besides, you do *give*. You give me endless praise and you worship my weird body like it's the best thing you've ever seen and... and you make me feel good about myself. You make me feel... worthy of love. I've never had that before. I've never felt worthy of anything."

Alastor's ears raised slowly as he met Vox's gaze and the Television Demon smiled softly at him. "I don't need sex. I could have an entire relationship with you and never have sex and it wouldn't bother me. The only reason I *want* to make love to you is because *you* want it. Because you want to try. Because you said you wanted me to wash their touches off you." Vox cupped his cheek, sweeping his thumb over his lips. "Let me give you this. I want you to feel safe and I want you to see that sex can feel good with someone who adores you. We just have to find something that works for you."

Alastor swallowed as his heart blossomed with affection and gratitude for the sweet man holding him. He leaned into Vox's chest and nodded. "Okay," he murmured and Vox squeezed him and kissed an ear.

"Do you want to stop and cuddle or do you want to try again?" Vox asked after a couple of minutes of holding him close.

Alastor traced his fingers over the circuit tracks in Vox's thigh. "I... I'm afraid of hurting you again."

"You won't hurt me if you feel safe and comfortable," Vox whispered. "It's my job to provide that for you. So, what would you like? Do you want to stop or do you want me to suck that delicious dick of yours?"

Heat swept across Alastor's cheeks as Vox petted his back. He glanced down at Vox's now soft cock where it lay on the bed. Its glow was dull, revealing the faint circuit traces on its surface, and Alastor tipped his head curiously before tapping his favourite button on Vox's hip.

They both watched as Vox's skin grew transparent and Alastor stared, fascinated by the tracts and wires and blood vessels that made up Vox's cock. He brushed his fingers over its shaft, watching electrical nerves fire with gentle blue light. He altered the pressure and blood vessels began to dilate, controlled by tiny organic valves, and Vox's dick twitched in Alastor's palm.

He swept his thumb over the head of Vox's cock, and more nerves fired, lighting up blue, and their combined glowing made Vox's dick glow a little brighter. Alastor stroked Vox a fraction firmer, watching blood vessels fill further, causing Vox's dick to harden.

Vox let out a quiet hum of pleasure and Alastor's tail flicked at the sound.

Alastor teased and stroked Vox and it was only when Vox reached for his dick did Alastor realise he had become aroused by the display.

Vox pumped him lazily before kissing the top of his head. "Lie down," he whispered. "Let me taste you."

Alastor did as requested, watching as Vox gently spread his thighs apart and settled between them, stroking his own cock as he looked down at Alastor in awe. "Damn, you're gorgeous."

Alastor swallowed, feeling strangely shy. He tried to close his legs but Vox chuckled and spread them again with a click of his tongue. "Let me look at you."

Vox raked his gaze over Alastor as he stroked himself and Alastor noticed his cock was weeping lightly once more.

Could he really make Vox that aroused without doing anything?

Vox trailed a hand over his stomach and between his thighs, light and teasing, and then he traced the same path with his lips, still stroking himself slowly. Alastor found his gaze glued to the man, pleased that his skin remained transparent. He could see Vox's heart beating a fraction faster, his lungs expanding a little wider, his fans speeding up...

Alastor moaned quietly as Vox swallowed his cock down without warning. His thumb rubbed over the crease of Alastor's groin as he sucked and licked and mouthed filthy kisses against Alastor's dick and Alastor clutched the sheets, watching Vox pump himself firmly.

He thumbed the patch of fur above Alastor's cock before gently massaging his balls, and Alastor whined and thrust into Vox's mouth.

Vox squeezed himself harder with a moan. He pulled off Alastor, looking a little breathless. "Fuck my mouth," he panted and Alastor gave him a wide eyed look, tail flashing in panic.

Vox pressed his thumb into the crease of Alastor's thigh and Alastor rutted against air. "You won't hurt me," Vox whispered.

Alastor exhaled shakily and Vox dug his thumb deeper into the crease. Alastor's dick twitched as he thrust once more against nothing. Alastor nodded desperately and Vox wrapped his lips around him and suddenly reached up to pinch his nipple.

Alastor rocked into Vox's mouth, head tipping backwards at Vox's encouraging moan.

"Vox," he gasped in warning after a few moments, but Vox grabbed his hip and swallowed him to the hilt, working his wicked tongue over Alastor's shaft until Alastor came with a quiet cry.

He sucked greedily at Alastor, lapping at the head of his dick and kissing his stomach as he thrust into his own fist. Alastor panted as he watched, mesmerised as Vox's balls filled with cyan fluid, which was propelled down one of the tracts in his dick then halted by a mechanical sphincter.

Alastor's heart raced. "Come on me," he panted. "Mark me as yours."

Vox looked at him wildly before he made a choked sound and captured Alastor's lips as he ground himself against Alastor's soft cock. Alastor threw his legs around Vox's hips and ravished his mouth as Vox rocked against him and *oh*, it felt *wonderful* when Vox clutched at him so desperately, all needy and whining and-

Alastor shoved Vox onto his back, coated two fingers in the lube still slicking his own ass, and slipped them inside Vox.

Vox arched and came over Alastor's stomach. "Fuck!"

Satisfaction curled in Alastor's stomach and he kissed Vox hard and demanding, thrusting his fingers in and out of him until Vox had milked every last drop of cyan release from himself.

Vox exhaled shakily against his mouth before nipping his lip. "Feels good," he murmured and Alastor scissored Vox open with his fingers, watching the man writhe and moan beneath him, body quivering at the overstimulation.

"Can you-" Vox suddenly cut himself off, looking embarrassed.

"Ask," Alastor whispered against his lips, kissing the corner of his mouth. "I might not be able to do it, but you can ask."

Vox squeezed his hip. "Can you put your dick in me? You don't have to move or anything, I just... I want... I want you to hold me. No one has ever just..." He trailed off, looking ashamed. "You don't have to."

Alastor raised his eyebrows before his heart ached at the realisation that Vox had never been *cared for* after sex. No one had ever held him and praised him and made him feel *wanted* for anything except as a tool for their own release.

That was about to change.

Alastor rolled Vox onto his side and plastered himself against his back, arms sliding tightly around his chest and stomach, before subtly summoning a condom and slipping his soft dick inside Vox.

Vox made a soft sound of surprise before wriggling back against Alastor and Alastor was startled by how... easy it all was to him.

He pressed his lips to the back of Vox's screen. "I love you," he whispered as he listened to Vox's fans slow down. "I love how patient you are with me. I love how gentle you are. You're so selfless. So good to me."

Vox shivered and slotted his fingers over Alastor's. "I just want you to be happy," Vox murmured. "Comfortable."

"You make me happy," Alastor whispered against the back of his screen before he nuzzled a port. "This is... lovely. I like this. I like being inside you. You're warm and... relaxed."

Vox huffed a laugh. "Yeah, well... that's your fault, isn't it, Mister *shy and demure*? That was so fucking hot, by the way - how you just... got on top and started finger-fucking me. Oh and don't get me started on '*Paint me with your come like I'm your canvas*'. Where did that come from?"

Alastor grinned. "I don't remember saying that."

"That's how it went in my head," Vox teased as he snuggled back against Alastor and wiggled his hips a little.

Alastor hummed at the sensation. It was very different to being with a woman - Vox was all hard muscle and angles and he was broad and his ass was warm and he smelled *incredible* and he didn't give up on Alastor just because there were certain things Alastor couldn't do and Vox truly *loved* him and didn't think him any less of a man for being raped and-

He buried his face between Vox's shoulders and held his lover tighter.

Vox sensed the dip in his mood and blanketed him in reassuring static. "You okay?"

“I don’t want to lose this,” Alastor whispered. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“Then fight for me, Al,” Vox murmured. “Fight for me like I’m going to fight for you. Stay by my side no matter what happens, no matter what she puts us through. Don’t give her the satisfaction of breaking us apart a second time.”

Alastor mouthed kisses over Vox’s shoulder. “Alright,” he mumbled. “We’ll speak to Charlie and Lucifer tomorrow morning.”

Vox hooked his fingers beneath Alastor’s thigh and tugged it over his hip and Alastor curled tightly around him and rocked into him slowly.

Vox’s breath hitched and he pressed back against Alastor desperately. Alastor rubbed a thumb over his stomach, his other hand spreading protectively over his heart.

“I’ve got you,” Alastor whispered. “Relax, Vox. Let me take care of you the way you deserve.”

Vox trembled a little, ducking his head. Distressed static prickled Alastor’s skin and his heart ached for the Television Demon. He had been starved of kindness and affection for far too long.

“Tell me what you need,” Alastor murmured as he pressed a sweet kiss to Vox’s shoulder and continued to rock gently into him.

“Hold me,” Vox managed. “Just like this. I… I need this. I need… I need you to *want* to stay with me.”

“I want to stay right here,” Alastor whispered as he trapped Vox against him. He peppered tiny kisses over his neck. “Stroke yourself. Slowly.”

Vox curled his fingers tighter around Alastor's thigh as he followed orders and Alastor hummed in approval as he rutted his soft cock into Vox.

"Such a good picturebox," Alastor praised and Vox nestled against him with a smile, their movements lazy and unhurried. "You are so beautiful, my dear."

"How do I feel?" Vox asked quietly, eyes slipping shut as his fingers fluttered over his spent dick.

"Warm," Alastor said as he let his own eyes slide closed. "A little tight. Needy." He nipped Vox's neck, earning a low whine. "Very needy."

"I need you to keep fucking me like this," Vox breathed. "All slow and leisurely and- and-"

"Like I want to be inside you for the simple reason that I want to be close to you?" Alastor drawled.

Vox trembled harder, gripping Alastor's thigh urgently. "You're so fucking perfect."

Alastor hummed and thrust in and out of Vox as the Television Demon teased at himself. It took a long while for their arousal to build and when it finally did, when they were both hard and aching, Alastor continued to fuck his lover slowly and deeply and Vox kept the same pace when stroking his own dick.

This time, their release spilled from them unhurriedly, almost softly, and Vox gave a sweet and gentle groan as Alastor hooked his chin over his shoulder, watching as he milked himself through his pleasure. He smoothed a hand over Vox's stomach, other hand still spread protectively over his chest, and he rocked into Vox until the heat and pressure grew overwhelming, and he clutched at Vox as he came a second time, humming contentedly.

Vox shivered a little and caressed his thigh and Alastor snuggled against his back.

After a few moments, Vox exhaled. "...You just fucked me."

Alastor hummed in agreement, tail wiggling.

Vox was silent for a few seconds. "Al. You just fucked me. You've still got your dick *inside* me."

"I'm quite aware."

Vox huffed a laugh. "...I think we've found what works for you."

Alastor tugged Vox tighter against him. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think it rather worked for you too."

A sharp burst of static raced through Alastor's hip in reprimand and Alastor found himself smirking and nuzzling into the back of Vox's screen. Vox spread his fingers over Alastor's flank, keeping him flush against his back.

"We should clean up," murmured Vox.

"Five more minutes," Alastor mumbled. "Let me enjoy how you feel in my arms. Let me enjoy looking at you for a little longer."

Vox's fans whirled a fraction faster as Alastor traced swirling patterns over his stomach. He exhaled shakily, curling his fingers into Alastor's flank. Alastor smirked deviously.

“You’re stunning, my dear. Even slick with your own sweat and come, you’re the most gorgeous creature I’ve ever seen.”

Vox’s screen tinted red. “*Al...*”

“Look at you,” purred Alastor as he trailed his finger over Vox’s transparent skin, following the path of his intestines. “Look at yourself, Vox. Look how spectacular you are.”

Vox ducked his head a little.

Alastor nipped his shoulder in scolding. “Look at yourself, Podcast. Look at your beauty. Look at how your organs glisten under the lights. Look at how your wires and blood vessels intertwine. Look at how your electronics and your tissues function in perfect harmony. Look at how prettily your cock glows. Look at how your release *glimmers* against your skin.”

Alastor nipped his neck and Vox immediately bared it further for him. “Say it,” Alastor whispered. “Look at yourself and tell me how lovely you are.”

Swallowing thickly, Vox glanced down at himself. “I...” He trailed off, choked.

Alastor kissed his neck tenderly. “You’re beautiful,” he encouraged.

“...I... I’m beautiful.”

“Good,” purred Alastor, smoothing his thumb over an LED strip. “You’re worthy of love.”

“...I’m worthy of... love.”

“Very good,” praised Alastor and Vox laid his free hand over one of Alastor’s. “You’re wanted and adored.”

Vox blew out a long breath. “I’m wanted and adored.”

“Excellent,” whispered Alastor and Vox began to smile. “You’re not a machine.”

Vox hesitated, staring at his wires and circuit boards.

“You’re not a machine,” Alastor said again.

“...I’m part machine.”

Alastor rubbed a thumb over his chest. “You are made up of a few electronics, but you aren’t a machine, my dear. Machinery doesn’t have emotions. It can’t feel touch the way you do, it can’t be patient and gentle the way you are. It can’t cry in anguish or moan in pleasure. It can’t hold me the way you do, it can’t make me feel safe the way you do. You aren’t a machine, Vox.”

Vox laced their fingers together. “...I... I’m not...”

Alastor’s fingers grazed over Vox’s stomach and down to his spent cock, stroking it lightly. Vox arched with a whine at the overstimulation.

“A machine can’t come all over me,” Alastor breathed against his shoulder. “A machine can’t be so deliciously *possessive* of me.”

Vox’s fingers pressed into Alastor’s hip hard enough to bruise.

“A machine can’t be so *needy*, ” Alastor growled as he shifted his hips, pushing his soft dick deeper into Vox.

“I’m not a machine,” Vox whimpered.

“Good man,” Alastor purred as he gave Vox’s dick one final tug before wrapping his hand around Vox’s stomach and pulling him closer. “I cherish you.”

Vox trembled and tears slipped down his screen as he squeezed his eyes shut. A frown touched Alastor’s brows as he wiped them away.

“You cherish me,” Vox whispered.

“You deserve happiness. You deserve to be treated gently. Your body deserves to be worshipped,” Alastor said quietly.

Vox trembled harder. “Al...”

“Say it.”

“...I deserve...” More tears escaped him and he ducked his head. “Shit,” he whimpered.

Alastor’s gaze softened and he wrapped himself tightly around Vox, peppering the back of his screen with kisses. “Relax,” Alastor murmured. “Let me take care of you, my love.”

He smoothed his hands over Vox’s chest and stomach and over his thighs and he mouthed kisses into his shoulders before carefully sliding out of him.

Vox whined, rolling over with wide, fearful eyes when Alastor left the bed. “Don’t leave me,” Vox whimpered.

“I’ll be back in a moment,” Alastor soothed as he disappeared into the bathroom and returned a few seconds later with a towel to find Vox sitting upright, antennae sparking with distress.

Alastor crawled on top of him and pushed him back against the bed, pulsing reassuring static into him when Vox’s hands gripped his hips desperately.

Alastor cleaned Vox up slowly, tenderly, leaning down to press a dotting kiss to his stomach once he was finished.

The tension in Vox’s frame eased and once Alastor had cleaned them both up, Vox threw the towel on the floor and pulled Alastor further up his body and held him tightly. Alastor’s tail fluffed and fluttered as he tucked his head against Vox’s chest and they clung to one another as their eyes slipped shut.

“You won’t be gone by morning, will you?” Vox teased once he had managed to collect himself.

“Keep petting my back like that and I’ll be sitting on your lap in meetings.”

Vox made an interested noise. “Hey, now that would be a power move. Having you just... tucked against me during business meetings. Letting you do whatever you want to me while I try to remain professional in front of clients...”

Alastor’s ears pricked up, intrigued by the idea. Vox grinned. “You like the sound of that?”

“I can do *whatever* I like to you?” Alastor purred, letting his shadows snake around Vox’s legs and arms.

Vox chuckled and kissed an ear. “I don’t know whether to be afraid for my life or incredibly turned on.”

“Why not both?” Alastor teased before he grazed his lips over Vox’s collarbone and squeezed him affectionately, shadows receding.

Vox sighed happily. “Damn, I love you.”

Alastor’s smile widened. “I love you too, darling,” he whispered before settling down and letting his eyes slide shut.

Tomorrow, they would face the King of Hell and hope he could help them to break out of Roo’s iron grasp, but tonight, they would hold each other and adore each other and be comfortable in the knowledge that they were both exactly where they were meant to be.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Brief rape memory in italic section

We all knew she would have to return eventually ;)

Also, I now have a twitter (or an X or whatever) - I realised I made one in 2018, posted 5 things in 2022, then forgot about it until a few days ago, so I've revamped it a little. Anyway, come chat to me on there - I'll use it for doodles and deleted scenes and other bits and bobs :)
<https://x.com/DancingdogAO3>

Chapter 50: Like Puppets On A String

Chapter Notes

Warning at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Vox awoke slowly to the warm and comfortable weight of Alastor on top of him. He smiled as kisses were peppered over his chest and he smoothed his hand over his deer's bare back, sighing happily when Alastor nuzzled into his neck before curling his fingers around it instead.

He gave a gentle squeeze and Vox hummed in interest, baring his throat a little further as he toyed with Alastor's tail. Alastor squeezed his throat a little harder and Vox smiled at his curiosity. Another hand drifted to his vents, teasing at them before slipping inside.

Vox moaned softly as Alastor stroked his filters and he traced patterns over Alastor's back, too comfortable to open his eyes and switch on his cameras.

Alastor squeezed his throat again and Vox huffed in amusement. "You have a sexy dream or something?"

Alastor remained quiet and tightened his grip on Vox's throat. Vox shifted a little, making himself more comfortable as Alastor explored.

His grip grew a fraction too tight and Vox frowned as his skin began to bruise. "Ah, that's starting to hurt."

Alastor pinned him against the pillows, choking him and Vox grimaced. "Yellow."

His grip didn't ease. Instead, Alastor's fingers slipped deeper into his vents, seeking out the cables that made up part of his nervous system. When he found them, he *yanked*.

Vox cried out in pain, eyes screwed shut. "Red!"

Alastor pulled again, hard, and the wires snapped.

Vox screamed.

He poured electricity into Alastor's frame to dislodge him, but the Radio Demon held on to his throat, and Vox finally opened his eyes, gaze wild as wave after wave of pain crashed over him.

Alastor's ears were flat, gaze wide and agonised. Vox shoved desperately at him but Alastor refused to let go, even as his skin began to burn beneath Vox's palms.

His teeth were clenched, chest heaving as he plunged his fingers into Vox's vents and clawed at delicate sensors and components. Vox howled and grabbed him by the neck, switching their positions as he slammed Alastor against the mattress with a snarl and still, Alastor gripped his throat and tore at his vents.

Alastor's eyes were filled with fear.

Vox released him, ceasing his electrical assault. "Red," Vox choked out. "Stop!"

Alastor's eyes grew impossibly wider and Vox noticed the white flash of his tail.

What was happening? Was this... Was this some sort of traumatic episode?

“It’s me!” Vox managed as he clutched at Alastor’s wrists. The grip on his throat eased. “Alastor, it’s me! It’s Vox! You’re safe! I promise you’re safe! Please let me go! You’re hurting me!”

Alastor released his throat.

And rammed his claws into his vents, tearing sensitive wires.

Vox snatched at Alastor’s wrists with another scream of agony.

“You’re fucking worthless,” Alastor spat.

Vox stared at him, stunned, as blood dripped from his vents.

“You’re vile. Repulsive. I should have left you with Valentino,” Alastor growled in disgust.

His ears were flat and his tail was flashing and his eyes were filled with fear even as his claws elongated, damaging more of Vox’s components.

“...She’s controlling you,” Vox whispered in horror.

Alastor’s smile widened into something ugly and unsettling and cruel, and his stitches glowed briefly, distorting his mouth. He looked like a crudely-sewn doll.

Suddenly, the stitches vanished and Alastor fell back against the mattress, trembling as he snatched his claws from Vox’s vents and dug them into his own hands until the skin opened up.

Vox doubled over with a pained groan, one hand fluttering over his bloodied vents.

Alastor raked his nails through his own burned skin, breaths quick and shallow as he stared at Vox, ears pinned, teeth gritted, and gaze becoming glazed.

The air grew heavy with panicked charge and Vox inhaled sharply before grabbing Alastor's hands to stop him from mutilating himself, trapping them either side of his head.

"Breathe," Vox ordered quietly. "Breathe, Al."

Alastor's gaze flicked between his bruised throat and bloodied vents and his breaths grew faster, trembles becoming more violent.

"It wasn't you," Vox whispered. "Al, listen to me, it wasn't you. It was *her*."

Alastor met his gaze, ears pricked towards him, listening through his panic.

"I know it wasn't you," Vox continued, stifling his pained groans. "You would never do this to me. You would never treat me like this. You would never call me 'worthless', would you?"

Alastor managed to shake his head.

"Exactly," murmured Vox and he grimaced at the burns on Alastor's wrists. "Relax, Smiles. It's fine. Everything's fine. We're fine. I... I'm sorry for attacking you. For not noticing sooner that something was wrong."

Alastor's breaths slowed a fraction, gaze becoming slightly clearer. Vox tentatively released a hand to caress his cheek.

Suddenly, he felt as though he were drowning and he was dragged backwards out of his own mind, suffocating in a space that shouldn't exist as he watched his body move against his

own will. He tried to fight, tried to take control of his body once more, but no part of him responded to his commands and he watched in horror as he suddenly fisted Alastor's hair and yanked his head backwards so sharply that Alastor cried out.

And then he was rolling Alastor onto his front and shoving his face into the pillows until Alastor could barely breathe, before forcing his legs apart and raking his claws down his back until he bled.

"On your knees, you filthy slut," Vox heard himself growl. Then, he smacked Alastor's ass hard enough to leave a handprint-shaped bruise and spread his ass cheeks apart and-

Vox was catapulted back into his own mind and he scrambled away from Alastor and looked down at his own hard dick that definitely hadn't been hard a few seconds ago. He panted in terror, hands shaking and he threw a wild gaze at Alastor to find the Radio Demon sobbing into the pillows, ass up, ears flat and entire body wracked with violent shudders.

"No. Stop. Please stop. Please," Alastor chanted over and over in between sobs as he clutched at the sheets.

"What the fuck?" Vox whimpered, electricity sparking throughout his frame. "What the fuck?!"

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Alastor. Sweetheart. It's over." He couldn't bring himself to touch Alastor. He didn't want to try. What if he-

His stomach rolled and he vomited over the edge of the bed.

He shuddered and wiped his mouth before slowly returning his gaze to Alastor, who had grown silent but was still trembling violently, tail flashing in fear as he clenched his thighs together.

“Al,” Vox choked, queasy at the sight of Alastor’s fearful submission. Was this how he had been that night? Terrified and sobbing, ass up and face smashed into the ground, nearly suffocating him, hands all over his shaking body, forcing him down, *hurting* him, ignoring his pleas to stop, *laughing* whilst they violated him, *enjoying* his pain and his fear and-

Distress and nausea were replaced with white hot fury and Vox’s skin lit up with charge as the lights flickered and flashed around him. He glared up at the ceiling, teeth gritted. “Fuck you!” he snarled. “I’ll fucking destroy you! I’ll make you suffer! I’ll turn you fucking inside out and I’ll fry every inch of skin and bone and *meat* on you, you fucking *bitch!*”

His fingers elongated into talons and the blue background of his screen darkened to black as his left eye spiralled. “Touch him again and I’ll *drag* you out of Purgatory by your lying tongue and I’ll make each of your organs bubble and blister! I’ll fucking melt your eyeballs and set your intestines on fire and you’ll *beg* for death! And when I don’t grant it to you, you’ll beg for Purgatory instead!”

His body twisted and elongated, limbs and neck being overtaken by great cables as electricity raced up and down his distorted body. The circuit traces painting his skin glowed a striking blue before turning a deep red, and small but sharp metal blade-like structures rose from his spine, akin to little dorsal fins.

His voice thickened with static. “Put me in your damn trials and we’ll see what fucking happens when I *finally* get my claws on you! You’ll wish you were back in that *nothing* because I’m going to make sure you feel *everything!*”

Alastor stared at him through one wide eye, radio dial pupils swinging erratically as his antlers grew.

Vox swallowed, trying to calm his outrage. He opened an arm gingerly in invitation.

“Come here, my beautiful buck. I promise you’re safe. I’ll keep you safe.” He couldn’t keep looking at Alastor like this. He couldn’t watch him tremble and sob and act so *submissive*. It wasn’t the Alastor he knew. He needed his Radio Demon to feel safe. He needed to protect his deer.

He needed to kill that fucking *bitch*.

He was surprised when Alastor pounced on him, burying his face into his chest, ears pinned, hands clutching desperately at Vox's back as distraught static stung Vox's skin. Alastor's frequency was grating against his and Vox growled, tangled long claws into Alastor's hair, wound another around his back, and tugged him flush against his body.

"No one will ever touch you again," Vox hissed as he made an effort to stop the charge racing through his body to prevent himself from injuring Alastor. The lights flickered faster and the old television flared to life, displaying snowy interference. "I'll kill anyone who dares touch you," Vox growled against Alastor's ear. "I'll make them *burn*."

He curled a large hand around Alastor's back. "You're fucking *mine*," he snarled. "You're mine and you're going to hold your head up high and let me dry your tears, and we're going to beat her game together." He caught Alastor's chin and thumbed his tears away, his gaze meeting Alastor's wide one. "No more crying, my love. No more trembling. No more submission. *No one* gets to make you feel like this ever again, do you understand?"

Alastor licked his lips and dropped his gaze to Vox's torn and bloody vents. A soft whine escaped him.

Vox gripped his chin, forcing him to meet his gaze. "It wasn't you," he growled.

Alastor swallowed and carefully laid his palms flat against Vox's vents, muttering a healing chant beneath a shaky breath. Once he was finished, he curled his fingers around the back of Vox's neck and drew their foreheads together.

"Last time this happened, you... She took you," Alastor whispered. "She took you away from me and you thought I'd betrayed you, that I hated you, and-" He cut himself off and winced.

"And I know better this time," Vox said as he carefully tugged Alastor into his lap. "I won't leave you this time, sweetheart." He grazed his claws gently down Alastor's cheek.

Alastor glanced down at Vox's bare lap briefly before settling against his chest and tucking his face against his neck. Vox slid an arm around his waist. "I can't believe you're letting me do this after what just happened," Vox choked out.

"It wasn't you," Alastor said firmly and Vox's heart somersaulted in his chest. He weaved his fingers through Alastor's hair, drawing him closer.

"I would never do that to you. I would never treat you like that," Vox whispered urgently and Alastor's fingers curled more securely around his neck as his other hand splayed over his back.

"I know."

Vox realised they were both trembling as they clung to each other. He forced his frequency into harmony with Alastor's and blanketed him in adoring, comforting static, and he exhaled when Alastor's loving static crawled over him.

After a few moments, Alastor brushed his fingers down Vox's spine, carefully exploring the sharp fins there. Then, he traced along the thick cables at Vox's neck and shoulders, and Vox shuddered a little. Exposed cables were *sensitive*.

"I've never seen your demon form," Alastor said quietly.

Vox nuzzled Alastor's hair, being careful not to catch his antlers. "I rarely use it. Don't really like it."

Alastor frowned, fingers following the path of one of the now-red circuit traces on Vox's skin. There were more cables where leg met hip and Alastor touched these too. Vox held his Radio Demon tighter.

"Why?" Alastor asked.

“I look like a freak,” snorted Vox.

Alastor pulled back a little to rake his gaze over his frame. His tail wiggled and Vox’s breath hitched.

“I think you’re beautiful,” Alastor said and Vox knew he wasn’t lying because his tail had given him away.

He slowly weaved his claws into the fur on Alastor’s chest before grazing them over his stomach and Alastor closed his eyes before his body started to shift and change into his demonic form. When he opened his eyes, the dials in them swung lazily, like slowing metronomes.

He smiled warmly through glowing stitches.

“Fuck,” Vox breathed, tracing Alastor’s jaw with his claws before touching huge, velvety antlers. “Can I kiss you?”

Alastor’s tail fluffed. “Yes.”

Vox kissed him deeply, lapping at the stitches at the edges of Alastor’s mouth, and he gasped when Alastor’s long claws curled around the cables snaking down his arms, tugging gently, squeezing.

Vox wrapped a large hand around Alastor’s slim waist and pulled him flush against his body, and Alastor suddenly wrapped long legs around him before dragging them both back against the mattress.

Vox nipped Alastor’s lip as he slipped an arm behind Alastor and gripped the base of an antler. He tipped Alastor’s head back and mouthed wet kisses against his throat. Alastor’s

claws pressed into his back, although he was careful not to break the skin.

“Vox, I... I don’t think I can...” He trailed off, ears lowering. “I *can’t*... Not after what just happened... I know it wasn’t you, but-”

Vox kissed his jaw. “I don’t want that. I just want to hold you and kiss you and explore this incredible body of yours.”

Alastor fell quiet and Vox peppered his face with kisses. “You’re fucking gorgeous, you know that?” Vox whispered.

Alastor dipped his claws into the ports beside Vox’s spine and Vox arched into his touch. Vox kissed him slow and hard, plunging his tongue into Alastor’s mouth and claiming every inch of it. “You’re *mine*,” Vox growled against Alastor’s lips and Alastor shivered before digging his claws into the thick tangle of cables at Vox’s neck.

Vox’s speakers produced a burst of static and Alastor gripped his hips with his thighs. “Always,” he whispered.

Another broken piece of Vox knitted itself back together. Alastor didn’t merely love him, Alastor *trusted* him with every fibre of his being. Even after Vox had been forced to almost *rape* him, Alastor still clung to him, still trusted Vox to protect him, to comfort him, to take care of him, and in turn, Alastor reassured him and touched him and adored his strange body despite what Roo had forced him to say earlier.

He wouldn’t let Roo take this away. He wouldn’t let Roo destroy this. Alastor was worth fighting for and no matter what Roo did to them, Vox would *fight* until his last breath.

He spent the rest of the morning worshipping Alastor’s body and Alastor spent the rest of the morning exploring his and touching every inch he could reach, before they squeezed into the shower together and cleaned each other up of blood and sweat, stealing sweet kisses under the spray.

When they dressed themselves - returned to their normal forms - they could barely keep their hands off one another, straightening each other's ties and suits before Vox pushed Alastor against the wall and ravished his mouth. Alastor arched into him, needy and desperate and Vox tangled their hands together before tilting his lover's head to the side and mouthing at his neck.

"We need to speak to Lucifer," Vox muttered, loath to release his beautiful Radio Demon.

Alastor splayed his free hand over the back of Vox's head, panting a little. "Mark me."

Vox's breath hitched and he pinned Alastor tighter to the wall as his heart raced with excitement. "Are you sure?"

Alastor tugged his head deeper into his neck. "You said I'm yours. Prove it. Make me yours, Picturebox."

Vox unfastened Alastor's top buttons and carefully eased his shirt open before rolling his tongue over the junction where shoulder met neck. Then, he bit down and sucked and kissed and lapped until Alastor was a whimpering, trembling wreck. He pulled back to admire the bruise darkening his skin. He brushed his thumb over it and Alastor cursed softly.

"Sensitive?" Vox purred and Alastor nodded.

Vox brushed his thumb over the bruise again and Alastor arched into him. Vox returned his gaze to the mark with a satisfied hum.

And his smile started to fade.

He had hurt Alastor.

The evidence was *right there*.

He had done to Alastor the very thing that others had done to him. He had added to the damage already inflicted upon Alastor's skin and he had *dared* to enjoy it. Dared to *tease* Alastor about it.

He was supposed to love and protect Alastor and instead, he had *hurt* him. Alastor hadn't even fought back because he was shaken from the morning. Submissive. He would let Vox do anything to him and instead of comforting Alastor, Vox had chosen to *injure* him in a possessive act of dominance. He had *betrayed* Alastor's trust.

His fans flicked on, face glitching and Alastor frowned before his eyes widened when Vox shook his head desperately.

"What the fuck am I doing? I- I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Alastor. I- I don't know *why*-"

"Vox," Alastor murmured as he wound his arms around the Television Demon. "Calm down. What are you apologising for?"

"Look what I've done to you," Vox whispered hysterically. "I've fucking hurt you again!"

Alastor blinked before cupping the edge of Vox's screen. "It's okay, my love. I asked for this. I *wanted* it. I wanted a mark of your adoration for me."

Vox shook his head again. "It's not alright!"

"Vox," Alastor said firmly. "I like it. It was made with love and devotion and I want to see it." He glanced at the mirror and Vox reluctantly released him so he could wander towards it.

Alastor touched the bruise with gentle fingers, smile widening. Vox approached him tentatively and Alastor immediately reached behind himself and pulled Vox's arms around him.

“I love you,” Alastor sighed happily as he melted against Vox’s body, eyes slipping shut in contentment.

Vox stared at him, stunned, before he relaxed and held Alastor tighter. He glanced at them both through the mirror, at Alastor’s genuine smile and the way he had slotted his fingers between Vox’s own, at his flopped ears and the way he tilted his head to proudly display the mark on his neck. *Vox’s* mark.

Vox shifted slightly and felt Alastor’s tail beating against his clothes.

...Perhaps not all bruises were bad. Perhaps it depended upon the intentions behind them.

Vox began to grin and kissed a relaxed ear. “I love you too, darling.”

Alastor knocked on Charlie’s office door, pushing inside when he heard a quiet “*Enter.*”

He and Vox froze at the sight of Lucifer perched on the edge of Charlie’s desk. He frowned at them suspiciously.

Vox plastered on a charming smile. “Ah, if this is a bad time we can-”

“You said if we stopped feeding her, she would grow weak,” Alastor said with a vicious smile as he summoned his cane and pointed it at Lucifer. “So, why did I nearly *kill* Vox this morning?”

Lucifer narrowed his eyes as Charlie glanced between the three of them in confusion.

“Alastor,” Vox warned softly but there was a fire building in Alastor’s stomach and he bared his teeth at Lucifer.

“You said if we stayed away from the ruins of the bookshop, if we stopped giving her *sacrifices*, then she would lose the ability to possess us. You said she’d lose her power over us.” Alastor tilted his head, voice growing thick with static. “*You lied.*”

Lucifer clenched his fists, horns rising slowly from his skull. “I didn’t *lie*. You must still be feeding her somehow.”

“Or perhaps you didn’t fill in all the *cracks*,” Alastor snapped. “Perhaps you aren’t as observant as you thought you were.”

“Dad, what is he talking about?”

Lucifer winced and glanced at Charlie. “...Don’t worry about it, sweetie. Daddy will take care of this.” He sent Alastor a sharp look. “Outside. Now.”

“I’d rather discuss it in here,” said Alastor sweetly before flicking his gaze to Charlie. “Looks like daddy is keeping secrets!”

“Alastor,” Lucifer growled and Alastor twirled his cane around one hand before smiling widely.

“Your father trapped a terrible monster in a prison of his and the other archangels’ creation, and now the bars are rusting and the monster is starting to *leak* out. It takes souls back to its prison and forces them to try to unlock the door and when they fail, they die up there, to be feasted upon. It has Vox and I on chains, acting as its little *puppets*, and first it asked Vox to deliver your father to it so that he could free it, and when that failed, it asked me to deliver *you* to it.”

Charlie stiffened and Lucifer’s wings sprouted from his back, tail whipping violently.

Alastor bowed his head a little. “But alas, I couldn’t bring myself to do it because, Princess, you have managed to worm your way into my cold, dead heart, and so I was *overjoyed* to learn from your father that if I simply stopped feeding the monster, it could no longer pull my strings.”

He shot Lucifer a dark look. “Except he lied. Because neither Vox nor I have fed the creature in *months* and yet it just possessed *both* of us. Which means it could very well force me to throw you into its prison, despite my every effort to fight against it.”

Flames danced in Lucifer’s palms. “The only way you would be able to force my daughter to do anything would be to use that deal you tricked her into. So, how about I extinguish your soul now and everyone’s problems will be solved, hm?”

Alastor snarled at Lucifer, fury rising as his antlers elongated and his body grew. He stilled when Vox slid in front of him, electricity crackling over his frame.

“Touch him and I’ll fucking melt your face,” Vox hissed, all earlier hesitation vanishing.

“Two assholes for the price of one. Works for me,” Lucifer spat as he raised his hand, ready to incinerate them both.

“Enough!” Charlie snapped as she leapt between them, holding her hands up. She scowled at her father before turning her glower on Alastor. “What are you talking about? What monster? This thing owns your soul?”

Alastor nodded, sliding out from behind Vox. “Don’t tell me daddy hasn’t told you about the evil creature that tricked him into giving Eve the apple?”

Charlie frowned. “Well, yeah, but...” She glanced at her father. “You said she was locked away. That she would never escape.”

“He lieeeed!” Alastor sang.

Charlie turned to her father fully. “Dad? How can it own Alastor’s soul?”

“And Vox’s!” Alastor pitched in cheerily.

The fire in Lucifer’s hands withered to smoke. “They fed her. Sacrificed souls to her. They granted her *power*-”

“But there must have been some sort of connection between here and her prison,” Charlie said with a scowl. “They obviously didn’t *want* to feed her. They didn’t *want* to be on her chain. So how did she communicate with them in the first place? You said Hell was safe from her. You said she couldn’t escape.”

“...She can’t. No mortal has ever passed the trials-”

“So she’s taken other souls?” Charlie gasped, eyes wide. “Alastor’s telling the truth? She took innocent souls and forced them to help her escape and when they couldn’t, she killed them? And you did *nothing*? These are *our people*, Dad!”

Lucifer flinched. “Charlie, hang on. She took the odd soul here and there and she was too quick for me to stop her, but I filled in the cracks where her power leaked through so that she couldn’t do it again. Vox and Alastor... They’re the ones who sacrificed *dozens* of souls to her, if not *hundreds*. And then they got themselves tethered to her, so now I can’t fully fill the cracks no matter how hard I try-”

“So, she can escape?” Charlie asked in horror.

Lucifer held a hand up. “No. Not if I destroy Vox and Alastor. Their chains will be broken and I’ll be able to fill in all the cracks.”

The fire in his palms relit but Charlie stood in his way. “And how do you know they’re the only ones? There might be others and you’ll have innocent blood on your hands.”

“I would hardly call these two Overlords *innocent*. ”

“Alastor didn’t have to tell me his orders. He could have tempted me. He could have lied. He could have thrown me into her prison without warning. He could have used our deal to force me into helping him. You can’t call him *evil* either.”

Alastor smiled, chest warming with fondness.

“And if they haven’t been feeding her, that means someone else has,” Charlie said firmly. “So, she isn’t just grabbing ‘the odd soul’. She’s gained enough power to possess two strong Overlords.” She narrowed her eyes at a worried-looking Lucifer. “So, you did lie. You said we were safe.”

Lucifer swallowed. “...It’s possible I could have missed a few cracks. Or maybe Heaven did!” He looked away, biting his lip. “Or maybe the cracks are on Earth...”

Charlie bristled. “...They could be anywhere? And what, you were just going to *kill* Alastor and Vox and hope it would magically fix everything? The *only* sinners that have managed to escape her and had the *decency* to warn you about her plans?”

Lucifer flinched and Charlie glowered at him. “How do they break their chains?”

“Without dying? They can’t,” Lucifer muttered. “And, y’know, they aren’t *that* decent. Vox led me to that bookshop and got me captured by her. I was lucky to be able to fight my way out.”

Vox ducked his head. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I was tortured up there and I was scared and I didn’t want to go back. I followed her orders because I was desperate to escape her. I... uh... I did actually like working with you and Queen Lilith.”

Lucifer pursed his lips before averting his gaze and Charlie's eyes filled with warmth as she glanced at Vox. She looked at her father pleadingly. "Help them."

Lucifer glanced up at her, hesitant. "I... I don't know how."

Alastor's heart sank.

"You must know something," Charlie said quietly. "You must know how to stop her from having so much power over them? Can we... Can we *talk* to her?"

"No," Vox, Alastor, and Lucifer said in unison.

"My dear, if you talk to her, she will most certainly trap you in that prison with her," Alastor said.

Charlie looked away with a scowl before slowly raising her gaze to her father. "Dad, do you think Mom could help?"

"Your mom won't help," Lucifer said with a sigh. "She made it pretty clear that she wants nothing to do with me." He shook his head. "She wouldn't know anything anyway."

"Maybe I could call her again? She might pick up this time..."

Lucifer didn't respond.

Alastor glanced over at Vox, noticing the Television Demon was lost in thought. He touched Vox's wrist and Vox startled before smiling softly at him and tangling their fingers together.

Even if Lucifer couldn't help them, they would find a way to get through this, together. Unlike Lilith and Lucifer, they had overcome their fighting.

When Alastor next looked at Charlie and Lucifer, they were watching both Overlords silently.

Charlie glanced at her father sadly. "There has to be a way to save them. If I could just talk to her, maybe make some sort of deal with her."

Alastor was surprised when his silhouette suddenly broke free and curled protectively around Charlie, shaking its head desperately at her.

He blinked at it, stunned, and Charlie touched its cheek in wonder.

Alastor's breath hitched as he felt a featherlight touch on his own cheek. She could interact with it?

"Hey there, little guy," Charlie cooed, petting a shadowy ear and Alastor's own ear flicked at the caress. Vox raised an eyebrow in query and Alastor shook his head. He would explain later.

Lucifer stared at the silhouette with a frown before pursing his lips. "Perhaps I could... speak to Heaven. To the other Archangels. Find a way to... break her hold on them. Her deals aren't like regular deals. She doesn't have a soul to trade so the chains might have a weak point on her end. If we could find what they're tethered to, maybe we can destroy it."

Alastor and Vox perked up and Charlie smiled at her father.

"...Give me a few days," Lucifer murmured. "I'll see what I can do. And then I'll figure out a way to keep her locked up permanently."

Alastor's silhouette slithered back to him, becoming dormant at his feet once more. Alastor squeezed Vox's hand.

A few more days. They only had to hold on for a few more days and then maybe they would have their shot at freedom.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: At the beginning, there is a 'risk' of rape, but nothing actually happens.

The plot will come thick and fast now ;)

Chapter 51: The Path To Purgatory Is Paved With Good Intentions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Vox rested his arm around Alastor's waist as they perched at the hotel bar, sipping whisky. Alastor studied Vox's face for a moment. He seemed far away; lost in deep thought as he had for the past two days, ever since their meeting with Charlie and Lucifer.

Alastor trailed a finger down an antenna and Vox slowly shifted his gaze to him.

"Are you alright, my dear?" Alastor asked softly. "You're awfully quiet."

Vox smiled reassuringly and squeezed Alastor's hip. "I'm fine. Just thinking."

"About?" Alastor asked curiously as he brushed his fingers down the edge of Vox's screen.

Husk raised an eyebrow at him as he polished a freshly-cleaned glass, but Alastor paid him no mind. These days, he found himself *wanting* others to see his affection for Vox. He was proud of Vox and he was proud of how much they had both overcome to reach this level of intimacy.

He had once thought that showing tenderness or any sort of love in Hell would be seen as a weakness, but now he realised that being this comfortable with each other made them *dangerous*. Every sinner in Hell would soon come to learn that they would fight tooth and claw for each other and that attacking either one of them was a big mistake.

Vox seemed to enjoy the public displays of affection, anyway.

"Just... about Roo. About how she could have become so strong," Vox murmured.

Alastor turned to face him a little more, showing he was listening as he nursed his whisky. Vox retracted his arm from his waist and tangled their fingers together over the bartop instead. Alastor's smile widened, feeling particularly pleased with the new arrangement. He nudged his knee against Vox's and Vox smiled affectionately.

His heart fluttered and Alastor realised exactly how sickeningly enamoured he was with his sweet picturebox. His tail fluffed beneath his clothes.

"Someone must be feeding her, sure, but there must be more to it," Vox said thoughtfully. "I mean, it took *years* of you bringing souls to her and then eventually *going* to Purgatory for her to be able to possess you. And it took a lot of energy, right? She's *never* been able to possess me before, but suddenly, she can take control of both of us in the same ten minutes? That's got to take a lot of power - and it wasn't even *useful* for her. She didn't get anything out of it."

Alastor frowned and rubbed Vox's knuckles. Last time she had gained *Vox* out of possessing Alastor.

"It can't be that she's taking the odd soul to feed off," said Vox. "There has to be more to it. And why has she been dormant all this time? The last time she made her presence known was after your fight with Adam, right? She tried to get you to lure Charlie to her."

Alastor nodded, squeezing Vox's hand. "But you interfered with her plan."

"Right, and since then, it's been radio silence. Why? If she's so desperate to get Lucifer or Charlie to free her, why give up for several months? Why spend all that time breaking us apart, punishing us for so many years, and then she suddenly... lets us grow close again?"

Alastor tilted his head in contemplation, a frown touching his brows. It *was* perplexing...

"Perhaps there is someone close to the royal family whom she has on a contract?" Alastor said slowly. "Someone she's more confident will be able to tempt one of them into helping

her escape?”

Vox pulled a face. “Except now she’s returned her attentions to us. So they must have failed too. They must have been pretty powerful though, because feeding off them has certainly given her an energy boost.”

Alastor stroked his thumb along Vox’s with a frown. “Perhaps they weren’t from Hell. Perhaps she was trying a different route - maybe she was using someone in Heaven to tempt one of the other Archangels into freeing her?”

Vox hummed, nodding slowly.

“Or maybe Valentino’s regenerated and he’s struck a deal with her,” Husk drawled, not bothering to look up from his polishing.

Vox and Alastor glanced at him.

“It’s impolite to eavesdrop,” Alastor said drily.

“Kinda hard to ignore the conversation when you’re sitting at my bar,” Husk said, equally as dry.

“Even if he had, that wouldn’t explain the months of radio silence,” Vox said uneasily. “And besides, Val won’t go anywhere near her. He’s terrified of her.”

“And he’s hardly strong enough to grant her that much power,” scoffed Alastor.

Husk shrugged. “I think you underestimate him. He’s one of the most powerful Overlords in all of the Pride Ring *and* he’s desperate.” Husk raised his gaze to Vox. “You scorned him. Angel’s told me how possessive he gets and you were his most prized possession. What do you think he’s gonna do when he loses you to his arch rival after fifty years?”

“Well, I think he’ll chop me up and put me in boxes in his closet for a couple of weeks,” Vox said, deadpan and Husk’s eyebrows drew together in confusion before Vox shook his head. “He’s too afraid to go running to her.”

Husk flicked his tail. “Maybe. Maybe not. He’s obsessed with you. Desperate people do crazy things. Maybe Roo was enjoying watching him fall apart for the past few months. Maybe she enjoyed watching you three make each other miserable.”

Vox pulled a face but he seemed uncertain, so Alastor drew Vox’s knuckles to his lips. “I would hardly call us *miserable*,” he murmured lowly and Vox’s screen tinted red.

Husk scrunched his nose before rolling his eyes. “Just making conversation. I barely know the asshole.”

“How is Angel, anyway? Enjoying his freedom?” Vox asked and Husk’s pupils dilated a little, a small smile touching his lips.

“He is, yeah. Seems to like being a director, although maybe that’s because he enjoys bossing people around.”

Vox sipped his whisky. “Good. Kid has talent. Keeps things tasteful. We haven’t had that for a while.”

Husk’s gaze softened. “...I’ll tell him you said that.”

Vox raised his glass in acknowledgement before there was a commotion from the stairs.

“There has to be *something* we can do,” Charlie said desperately, trailing after her frowning father. Vaggie followed after them silently, looking rather sympathetic.

“I’ve done all I can,” Lucifer sighed. “There isn’t anything I can do if they refuse to even *meet* me.”

“Michael’s your *brother*,” Charlie said. “Surely you could at least meet with him? Or Gabriel? One of them *has* to listen!”

Lucifer halted and turned to face his daughter. “They refuse to discuss anything regarding The Root. I’m sorry, Charlie. They won’t listen.”

Charlie’s eyebrows drew together. “What about Alastor and Vox? Are they supposed to stay tethered to her forever?”

Alastor instinctively bristled and glanced around the room, checking for any guests. Fortunately, the bar and lobby were quite empty and the few people present - like Husk - already knew of Vox and Alastor’s chains.

“There’s nothing I can do,” said Lucifer apologetically. “Talking to her isn’t an option and neither is facing her alone. It took all the Archangels to imprison her last time and if the walls of her prison are weakening and she’s growing stronger, I can’t risk facing her in her territory. I’m sorry, Charlie, but Vox and Alastor got themselves into this mess - they’ll have to deal with the consequences.”

“That isn’t fair!” Charlie snapped. “She manipulated them into it! Forced Vox into accepting a deal and targeted Alastor when he was afraid and alone!”

Again, Alastor flinched and glanced sharply at Husk, only to find him putting glasses away and barely paying attention to the theatrics unfolding in front of them. Then, Alastor felt a hand touch his waist and he swivelled to glimpse Vox’s reassuring smile.

He was safe. Vox was here and he was *safe*. No one would be stupid enough to test their luck against two powerful Overlords.

“The deals that sinners make is none of my business,” Lucifer muttered as he turned and continued his path down the stairs. Charlie scrambled after him and jumped in his way.

“Alastor is my *friend*, ” she said firmly. “And Vox... Well, Alastor cares about him and he’s been helping a lot with this hotel. I want to help them. There has to be another way.” Her gaze softened. “Dad, don’t you think they deserve a chance at happiness? At redemption? You can’t deny that they’ve changed over these past months.”

Both Alastor and Vox startled and glanced at each other with wide eyes. *Redemption?*

Behind them, Husk chuckled and they threw him a confused look. He smirked and shrugged and returned his attention to his glasses.

‘*Changed?*’ Vox mouthed and Alastor stared at him helplessly and shook his head.

The princess had a tendency to over-exaggerate the *goodness* in sinners. Vox and Alastor were hardly worthy of halos - and they didn’t desire them either. They were quite happy together in Hell, surrounded by their closest friends, teasing each other over their television and radio shows and enjoying one another’s company after so many decades of loneliness and pain. They were learning to trust each other again and take care of one another, and they hadn’t battled any Overlords in *months*, and they only fought sinners to protect each other, and they were learning how to be patient and how to support each other through the traumas they had both suffered, and-

Oh.

Alastor blinked. Perhaps they had changed a *little*.

But still, they were hardly saints! And who wanted to be an angel anyway? Hell was far more fun! And Heaven didn’t have Rosie or Velvette or Charlie or-

Alastor’s ears flattened.

Shit.

When had he started *caring* about other people this much?

He glanced over at the wide-eyed Vox and his gaze softened. Perhaps caring about other people wasn't such a bad thing.

"I don't know how to break their contracts," Lucifer said wearily. "I have no power over her deals and she won't listen to any counter-offers unless it involves her freedom and I *can't* do that. I can't let that *thing* escape. She's far too dangerous - not just to sinners, but to *everyone* in Hell, Heaven, and Earth."

Charlie clamped her mouth shut and Lucifer rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I can't fix this one."

He turned and headed towards the hotel doors.

"Alastor!" Husk shouted in alarm.

Alastor turned to him and his stomach dropped as he watched Husk trying to tear Vox out of his suit.

Vox was *smoking*.

His expression was one of frantic panic and sparks leapt from his frame as he clawed at his own shirt. His screen glitched and flickered and Alastor ripped his buttons open and inhaled sharply at the *heat* radiating from Vox's skin.

His vents were closed.

Vox clawed at them desperately before doubling over and putting his hands over the back of his screen in obvious pain. An unnatural electronic scream tumbled from his speakers and Alastor's heart leapt to his throat as he forced Vox upright and reached for the buttons on Vox's hip - the one that would switch his body from a mostly electronic and mechanical functioning to a mostly biological one.

Vox pushed an urgent hand against his chest and Alastor looked up to see the components in his screen had blown from the increasing heat, rendering his face a solid black void.

Alastor tensed. He had no mouth. If he switched Vox's systems from mechanical ventilation to organic respiration now, he would suffocate.

"What do I do?" Alastor whispered in horror. "Vox, how do I stop this?"

His skin was *boiling* and sparks stung Alastor's hands. Husk threw a glass of water over him but it began to evaporate almost instantly and there was a series of *pops* and *bangs* from inside Vox's body.

Vox grew limp as smoke billowed out from his closed vents. His head swayed before falling back against the bar.

Alastor glanced down at the lights on his hip before quickly pushing a red one.

Vox shut down.

"Ice," Alastor growled. "I need ice. *Now*. Before he wakes up."

He caught Vox before he slipped off the stool and grimaced at the terrible heat radiating from every inch of his skin. He laid the television carefully on the floor as Husk scurried around the bar and dumped a bucket of ice over him.

Alastor removed Vox's shoes, socks, and trousers, before peeling him fully out of his ruined shirt and tie.

There was the gentle click and whirr of Vox's systems rebooting as Husk dumped another bucket of ice over him and finally, Vox's skin began to cool as whatever processes had been initiated to generate such heat were cancelled.

At the third bucket of ice, Vox lurched upright, startled, and swiped blindly at the air. Alastor caught his wrists.

"Easy, Vox. It's alright. We're trying to help."

Sparks jumped between Vox's antennae and he tore his hands from Alastor's grip and tried to scramble backwards. His vents slid open but his screen remained dark and static crackled out of his speakers when he tried to talk.

He backed away, curling in on himself slightly.

"Vox, darling. It's me. You overheated," Alastor said gently.

Vox continued to crawl away from him and Alastor frowned and bathed him in reassuring static, providing a low, comforting frequency for Vox's erratic one.

Finally, Vox stilled and Alastor placed a hand on his knee, thankful to feel it much cooler now.

"You're safe," Alastor whispered, paying no attention to the other wide-eyed faces in the room. "I promise. Can you tell me what happened?" It had to be Roo. She must have performed some sort of override on Vox's systems to interfere with his ventilation mechanics and overwork his processors to generate so much heat in such a short space of time.

Vox didn't reply. He reached out a shaky hand and laid it atop Alastor's and Alastor realised two things simultaneously.

One, Vox's vocoder was damaged. Two, Vox was *deaf*.

Alastor swallowed, memories thrown back to a dark street; a battered and bloodied Vox sprawled in front of him, crying and begging him to stay, asking why he wasn't good enough for Alastor.

Alastor clasped Vox's hand between both of his, squeezing and rubbing affectionate circles into his palm with a thumb. Vox's shoulders relaxed a fraction.

"I'm here," Alastor murmured, wrapping Vox in adoring, protective static. "I'm right here, my love."

Vox's fans worked on overdrive to cool his systems down and Vox slowly drew his knees to his chest, embarrassed by his lack of clothes and the fact that the majority of his body was now on view for everyone to see.

Alastor narrowed his eyes and brought Vox's hand to his lips. Let them look. Let them see how beautiful Vox was. Let them see what Alastor got to touch whenever he pleased. Let them see what belonged to Alastor. Let them be *jealous*.

Once Vox had calmed a little, Alastor tapped Vox's hip, circling the button that would make his skin grow transparent. Vox caught his wrist quickly, shaking his head.

Alastor frowned. His hand drifted to Vox's face and he allowed his magic to flow through his screen, muttering a quiet chant as sigils flashed around them.

Vox's screen flared to life and he looked up at Alastor with a panicked expression.

“I need to see the damage so I can fix it,” Alastor said softly. He didn’t want to miss anything.

Vox swallowed, glancing around the hotel. “Cccccan we g-g-go *tz* somewhere prrrrrivate?” An error flashed on his screen and he dismissed it.

Alastor cupped the edge of his screen before nodding and sliding his arms beneath Vox. Startled static burst from Vox’s speakers when Alastor picked him up and cradled him protectively to his chest. He flashed Vox a wide smile, pleased when the Television Demon curled into him slightly.

“Dad,” Charlie said firmly, catching their attention.

Lucifer stared at them, mouth a thin line and Charlie crossed her arms.

“We can’t let them suffer like this,” she said.

Lucifer opened and closed his mouth, gaze raking over Vox’s frame.

“We have to do something,” Charlie insisted.

Finally, Lucifer sighed. “There’s nothing we can do,” he said before turning away and exiting the hotel, leaving Charlie to glower at the closed door.

“Fine,” she muttered before she turned a sympathetic gaze on Vox and Alastor. “I’ll figure something out. I promise.” With that she trotted upstairs, Vaggie following after her worriedly.

Alastor watched them disappear before casting his gaze to Vox. “Come on, my dear. Let’s get you healed.”

Vox traced patterns over Alastor’s chest. “Czz don’t y-you mean *repaired*?”

Alastor held him a little tighter as he strode towards the elevator. “No,” he said airily, smirking when Vox’s fingers curled into his shirt.

When the elevator doors slid shut, Vox snuggled deeper into Alastor with a relieved smile and Alastor blew out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding.

A couple of days later saw Alastor and Vox at the hotel bar once more, sipping brandy and playfully arguing about which era produced the best music. Alastor, as usual, advocated for jazz, but Vox protested that rock and roll was the best era, closely followed by classic rock. Husk soon joined the discussion, giving his reasons as to why blues was the greatest genre of music and the argument quickly devolved when Alastor suggested that the *Baroque* era was far superior.

Angel Dust slipped inside the hotel with a jaunty whistle and made a beeline for the bar. At the last moment, he sat beside Vox, staring at him curiously.

Vox blinked at him and Angel grinned sheepishly.

“Y’know, I don’t think I ever apologised for being a homewrecker,” he chuckled awkwardly.

Vox frowned in confusion and Angel waved his hand. “For coming between you and Val the way I did. In my defense though, I thought he’d told you and you were fine with it.”

Vox pulled a face. “Yeah, well, Val did a lot of shitty things.” He frowned. “For a little while, I hated you for it. Then I realised you couldn’t exactly say *no*.”

Angel winced and rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, for what it’s worth... I’m sorry.”

Vox snorted. “Don’t be. You did me a favour.” He shot Alastor a wink before his smile faded and he returned his gaze to Angel. “Uh... I’m sorry for not stepping in.” He tapped his fingers restlessly against the bartop. “I knew what he was doing, what he was capable of and I... I should have said something.”

“You did,” Alastor pointed out.

“Not enough,” Vox muttered. “I could have done more. A lot more.” He glanced at a wide-eyed Angel. “I let him get away with far too much.”

Angel’s shoulders slumped before he plastered on a smile. “Hey, nothing I couldn’t handle!”

Vox raised an eyebrow and Angel’s smile faltered. He held himself and rubbed one of his arms and Vox mused over how it was like looking in a mirror. “Yeah, okay. It was pretty shit,” Angel murmured.

Vox sipped at his brandy, guilt tugging at his chest, but Angel suddenly smiled and brightened up.

“Things are better now though! No chain around my throat, my own studio, I don’t come home with bruises every night.” His gaze softened. “And you’re a better boss than Val ever was.”

Vox huffed in amusement. “Thanks.”

“I mean it,” Angel grinned. “Everyone at the studio thinks so. And I’ve heard some of the tech guys - some of *your* guys - saying it too. Something’s changed in you, boss. Something *good*. You seem... I don’t know... *brighter*?” His gaze flicked briefly to Alastor. “Happier.”

Vox’s screen tinged red and Alastor drank his brandy with a smirk.

“Probably just... sleeping better,” Vox mumbled.

Husk scoffed and Angel grinned wickedly. “Yeah, probably. I’d also sleep better with Alastor’s dick in me.”

Alastor inhaled his brandy and choked.

Vox’s screen grew a deep crimson as Husk wrinkled his nose.

Angel barked out a laugh before patting Vox on the back. “I’m messing with you! I’m happy for you both! Compared to Val, Alastor’s practically a good influence.”

“I’m no such thing,” grumbled Alastor in distaste.

“Little bit,” Angel teased, holding his thumb and forefinger close together before Husk slid some sort of fruity cocktail in front of him and Angel’s eyes blew wide and entranced.

Vox watched him for a moment and a small, genuine smile touched his lips. “I’m glad you’re happier, Angel.”

Angel sucked obscenely at the straw as he glanced at Vox. He offered Vox a brief, sincere smile before winking. “Yeah, well... I’m sleeping better too.” He rolled his tongue over the length of the straw before shooting Husk a coy look and quickly returning his gaze to Vox with a wiggle of his eyebrows as Husk turned away and began polishing glasses he’d only just finished polishing.

Vox bit back a laugh.

Suddenly, there was pressure around his neck and his face was smashed into the bartop.

“What the *fuck* did you say to Charlie?” Lucifer snarled and a choking sound from Alastor confirmed that the king had them both pinned.

“What are you talking about?” Vox managed.

“Where the fuck is she?” Lucifer roared.

Vox frowned in confusion and tried to sit upright, but Lucifer kept him restrained.

“Why would we know?” Alastor growled, static prickly as he readied himself for a fight.

“Tell me where she went!” Lucifer snapped as he yanked them both backwards off their seats, throwing them unceremoniously onto the floor.

Alastor bounced to his feet in under a second, baring his teeth as his antlers grew. He inched towards Vox, eyes flickering to dials as he glowered at Lucifer. Vox sat up slowly.

“We haven’t seen her,” Vox said calmly, one eye on Alastor. *Easy, sweet buck. Don’t piss off the king...*

Vaggie sprinted down the stairs, face pale as she clutched her phone. She said nothing as she handed it to Lucifer with shaking fingers.

Lucifer's eyes widened. "No," he whispered and before the device could slide out of his grip, Alastor caught it.

Vox clambered to his feet and read the text from Charlie over his shoulder.

It had only been received three minutes earlier and contained exactly two words. Two words that had Vox and Alastor inhaling sharply as their veins turned to ice.

Stupid girl :)

Chapter End Notes

Charlie certainly knows how to get herself in a pickle!

Chapter 52: Calm Before The Storm

Chapter Notes

warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Lucifer's horns and wings vanished as he sank to the floor and buried his face into his hands.

"She... She can't be... She... She's *lying*..."

Alastor's ears flattened and Vox glanced worriedly at the king before subtly curling his fingers into the back of Alastor's coat, seeking comfort.

"That bitch can't really have Charlie, can she?" Angel asked in a small voice.

Alastor's gaze darkened before he plastered on a false smile. "Not for long, my dear chum!" He whirled around and headed towards the door.

Vox startled and gripped his arm instinctively. "Where are you going?"

"Why, to make a deal, of course!" Alastor said through gritted teeth.

Sparks jumped between Vox's antennae. "Bad idea! Nope! *No*. Are you crazy?" he asked hysterically.

Alastor's smile grew more strained. "Apparently! But I can't very well leave the princess trapped in that empty void forever, can I? I'm sure Roo and I can come to some sort of... arrangement."

Vox looked nauseous and he shook his head frantically. “No! No, Alastor!” He gripped Alastor’s arm tighter. “If you go back to her, she’ll *kill* you. She doesn’t need you anymore. Not now that she has Charlie.”

“Charlie doesn’t know anything about Purgatory,” Lucifer growled, refusing to look at them. “She’ll be useless to Roo.”

Alastor frowned as he returned his attention to Vox. “Which means she *won’t* kill me. She needs an Archangel. She needs *Lucifer*.”

“And she’ll get me,” said Lucifer lowly as he stood and threw his wings out with gritted teeth.

Alastor tensed and put a hand out. “Is that wise? Me striking a deal with her is one thing, but if you meet with her, the only way she’ll agree to releasing your daughter is if you release *her*.”

“Regardless of who meets or talks to her, she’ll ask for me to release her in exchange for Charlie,” Lucifer snapped.

Vox stiffened. “You can’t seriously be considering that?” he asked in horror.

Lucifer’s wings flared and Vox flinched a little, likely reminded of Valentino’s intimidation tactics. Alastor gently touched the inside of his wrist and Vox relaxed.

“Charlie is my *daughter*,” Lucifer hissed. “I’ll do anything to save her.”

“Even release that *thing* upon all of Hell, Heaven, and Earth?” Alastor asked calmly. “You’d be responsible for the deaths and suffering of *billions*. Charlie would never forgive you.”

“I trapped her once. I can trap her again,” Lucifer growled.

“Not alone,” Alastor drawled. “You had the other Archangels with you, back when you weren’t *damned*.”

Lucifer let out an animalistic noise before heading towards the main doors to the hotel.

Panic gripped Alastor’s chest as he thought about the consequences of Lucifer releasing Roo from Purgatory. He thought about Vox and himself - at their newfound happiness being brutally ripped away from them again. He thought about Rosie and Velvette and how Roo could make them suffer, how she would feast on their misery, how she would hurt them and torment them until she grew bored of them and left them to die alone.

Hell wasn’t a particularly happy place, but there was always some sort of *hope* - hope for power or fame or sex or friendships or, indeed, redemption. But if Roo took over...

There would be nothing but pain and fear and anguish.

Even Alastor and Vox had brief interludes of happiness and peace between the torture, but if Roo settled in Hell, that would disappear. Would she destroy the souls she fed off? Or would she encourage them to destroy themselves? To end their own suffering, like they did in Purgatory?

A shadow wrapped around Lucifer and dragged him away from the doors and Alastor slid in the path of the king, hands clasped behind his back. “I’m afraid I can’t let you do that, your majesty.”

Lucifer’s eyes glowed a deep red, flames flickering between his horns as his tail thrashed behind him. “I beg your pardon?”

“There is too much at stake,” Alastor drawled, hiding his nervousness. He stood no chance against Lucifer. Still, he couldn’t lie down and let the man condemn every living - and dead -

creature to eternal pain and misery.

“Charlie is more important than all of it!” Lucifer snarled and there was wild desperation in his gaze. He threw a hand out at Vox. “Tell me you wouldn’t do the same if Vox was in her position!”

Alastor blinked before he lowered his shoulders a fraction. “If you release that thing upon Hell, *everyone* will be in her position.”

Lucifer’s eyes flashed brightly. “Get out of my way.”

Alastor hesitated for a few moments before his ears fell and he dropped his gaze, teeth gritted. “She doesn’t care who releases her. Let me try. I’ll strike a deal with her - if I beat the trials, she releases Charlie.”

“The *fuck* you will!” Vox hissed, grabbing Alastor’s shoulder.

Lucifer scoffed. “No one can beat those trials. And what does it matter who releases her? I’ll be able to do it far quicker than you could beat even the first trial.”

“That’s the whole point, you half-witted moron!” Alastor snapped and Lucifer jerked backwards in surprise. “If *I* take part in the trials, it will give *you* time to speak to the other Archangels, to make a plan to recapture her before she can slither too far out of Purgatory.”

Lucifer scowled. “They won’t listen to me.”

“Then make them!” Alastor roared, startling the room. “You’re the King of Hell! She’s the Root of All Evil! *Make* those damned angels listen!”

Lucifer scowled at him. “You won’t beat the trials.”

“I will,” Alastor growled. “I have to.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Vox snarled, whirling Alastor around. “*Seven years*. Seven years for four trials! You remember what that was like, right? You remember what she did? The pain and grief and *torture*? Don’t be fucking *stupid*, Alastor!”

“If I don’t, he will!” Alastor snapped, gesturing to Lucifer. “He’ll release her through a backdoor and all of Hell, Heaven, and everything in between will *suffocate* in her darkness! And that includes you and Rosie and Velvette and everyone in this damn hotel!”

Vox stared at him in stunned silence and Alastor averted his gaze, humiliated. He wasn’t supposed to care this much. Of course he cared about Vox; he *loved* Vox, but... maybe there were different sorts of love. Maybe that was why it hurt so much to think about Roo getting her claws on Rosie or Velvette or Charlie or even Husk and Angel. Any of the hotel staff, in fact.

“And if you don’t make it through the trials, Lucifer will release her anyway to save Charlie, and you... you’ll be-” Vox cut himself off with a scowl and a haunted look. “Alastor, *please*. Don’t go.”

“I can’t keep living like this,” Alastor hissed. “I can’t keep wondering when she’ll next take control of one of us, or when she’ll pull our chains. I can’t keep living in fear of how she’ll torture us next!”

“Even if you do beat the trials and free her, what’s to stop her from immediately killing you and Charlie?” Vox asked, voice growing higher in desperation.

“I’ll be careful about the deal I make,” Alastor muttered.

Vox’s face glitched, eyes wild. He grabbed Alastor’s hands frantically and shook his head. “Don’t do this,” he begged. “Al, *please*. *Please* don’t do this! I don’t... I *can’t* lose you again. I’ve only just got you back!” His face glitched again and a tear streaked down his screen.

“We were happy! We... We were so fucking happy, for the first time in *decades*! You... You *can't* just... You can't leave me again. You can't *sacrifice* yourself, put yourself through all that torment and agony to *try* to save someone who might already be dead!”

Lucifer bristled, wings flaring. “Charlie is alive!” he snarled. “Roo is holding her hostage!”

“And how can you be sure?” Vox snarled back. “Roo lies! You might free her and find out Charlie's already dead!”

“She won't be,” Lucifer said desperately, eyes blowing wide.

Vox whirled on Alastor again, looking more hysterical. “If you go to Purgatory, you won't come out!” His antennae sparked and his face glitched rapidly. “The trials will destroy you, like they destroy everyone else! She gave you a second chance, she won't give you another.”

Alastor grazed his fingers down the edge of Vox's screen. “Now she has Charlie, you and I have outgrown our usefulness. Once Lucifer releases her, she'll destroy both of us and feast off everyone else. I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't, so I might as well buy everyone some time. At least I'll die on my terms, not hers.” His gaze softened as he brushed Vox's tear away. “And perhaps I can spare you. If Lucifer and the other Archangels can recapture her the second she escapes Purgatory, then maybe there's a chance for you to *live*.”

He was startled when Vox suddenly slid his arms around his waist and tugged him against him, despite their audience.

“No,” growled Vox fiercely. “If you're doing this, I'm coming with you. You're not sacrificing yourself to protect me. You promised we wouldn't do that ever again. We do this together or not at all.”

Alastor stiffened. “Absolutely not. You're staying here.”

“Fuck you!” Vox snapped, holding Alastor tighter. “You don’t get to take my choice away again! I won’t let you face those trials alone. Not this time. If we want any chance at beating them, we *have* to do it together.”

“Vox,” Alastor protested as panic simmered in his gut. “Don’t be ridiculous. This isn’t a ‘*Power of Friendship*’ moment. You said yourself that you couldn’t even beat the first trial!”

“And if you die up there, alone and in pain and *suffering*, how the *fuck* do you think that’ll make me feel?” Vox hissed. “Knowing that I did *nothing* to help? Knowing that I abandoned the man I love? Because I do love you, Alastor, and I don’t care how many people know and I don’t care how pathetic that makes me. I *love* you and I’m not leaving you this time. We’ve come too far, fought too fucking hard for you to do all of that alone! I’m coming with you, whether you like it or not.”

Vox’s chest heaved with righteous fury despite the hint of fear in his gaze and something in Alastor that had shattered long ago suddenly glued itself back together as his heart filled with warmth and admiration for his picturebox.

Vox wouldn’t leave him. Vox would never leave him again. Vox *adored* him. Vox didn’t care that he was damaged and afraid. Vox saw through his mask. Vox loved him despite his broken parts, loved him despite everything they had done and said to each other. Vox had *forgiven* him for the past.

He curled his fingers into Vox’s shirt and tipped his head against Vox’s as he closed his eyes, releasing a shaky exhale as he finally allowed himself to be vulnerable, as he finally let the terrible fear welling inside him show.

“Okay,” he whispered, ears low as he clung to Vox.

Vox splayed his hands protectively over Alastor’s back and waist, pulsing a gentle burst of static between them and Alastor stifled a whimper.

Fuck, he was *terrified*.

Terrified of dying permanently. Terrified of the torture the trials would put him through. Terrified of finding Charlie already dead and his efforts being for nought. Terrified of watching Vox suffer. Terrified of *losing* Vox forever.

“Well, this is touching and all, but I’m going to go rescue my daughter now,” growled Lucifer as he marched towards the main doors.

The lights flickered and flashed as static crackled from Vox’s speakers. He didn’t release Alastor, nor did he pull away. “We’ll go. You speak to Heaven,” Vox said lowly, *dangerously*, as he rubbed Alastor’s back, not bothering to look at Lucifer.

Alastor’s tail attempted to flash white beneath his clothes. *Predator*, cried that animal part of his brain. Yet, he clutched Vox’s shirt tighter, pressing himself flush against his body. This predator was *protecting* him.

“You could be *years*,” Lucifer snarled. “And you’ll never make it! No one beats the trials! You aren’t meant to! They aren’t *yours* to beat!”

“Then you’ll have plenty of time to convince the Archangels to fight alongside you,” Vox growled. “If we’re still not out by then, feel free to rescue your daughter, but don’t go in unarmed and without a plan. If it took all the Archangels to lock her away last time, then make sure they’re standing by.” He secured his grip on Alastor and pressed a dotting kiss to his forehead and for once, Alastor didn’t care who was watching.

If this was their last moment of tenderness together, the entirety of Hell could watch for all he cared. Let them see what Alastor had; let them see how *lucky* he was.

Vox held him for a few more minutes, refusing to be rushed, refusing to be *intimidated* by Lucifer and finally, Lucifer let out a frustrated growl and stalked upstairs, Vaggie in tow.

Alastor shifted, pressing his face into Vox’s neck and Vox petted his hair soothingly as Alastor’s arms snaked around his back.

Five more minutes of this. If they were to die in Purgatory, then Alastor wanted five more minutes of this.

“I love you,” Alastor whispered against Vox’s neck and he felt the Television Demon sag in his arms before squeezing him tighter.

“I love you too. So fucking much,” Vox breathed against his ear before he pressed a kiss to it.

A tear rolled down Alastor’s cheek.

They were going to die.

Whether they went to Purgatory or not, Roo would kill both of them once she was free.

So many years wasted fighting each other and now, when they had finally learned how to love each other, they were given only a few months to do so.

His heart clenched painfully and he curled his fingers into Vox’s coat. He wasn’t ready to die. He didn’t *want* to die. He had so much to live for right here, in his arms.

Grief overwhelmed him, suffocated him, drowned him, and he cried silently into Vox’s neck, hiding his face from their remaining audience as his shoulders shook with his sobs.

Fingers threaded through his hair and a large hand spread possessively across his lower back. Comforting, adoring, *fearful* static wrapped around him as Vox’s frequency fell into harmony with his own, and Alastor pressed into Vox, needing to be closer, needing to *feel* him and hear him and smell him and *taste* him. He pressed anguished kisses to Vox’s neck as he cried and Vox made a wounded noise before the lights flickered again.

“Get out,” Vox muttered and Alastor stilled in confusion.

Suddenly, Vox looked between a stunned Angel and Husk. “Get the fuck out!” he snarled and Husk and Angel jumped before fleeing from the room.

Vox caught Alastor’s chin the moment they were gone and pressed a hard, demanding kiss to his lips, herding him towards the couch.

Alastor fell onto the couch and his breath hitched when Vox started undressing him, kissing every inch of skin that was revealed to him.

“If these are our last moments in Hell, then I’m going to worship you, Radio Demon,” Vox growled as he dropped to his knees and spread Alastor’s thighs apart, settling between them. “Because it might be the last time I get the chance to.”

Alastor let out a choked sob before quickly sliding Vox out of his coat and tie and waistcoat. He wanted to *see*. He wanted to *touch*.

Vox unbuttoned his own shirt and allowed Alastor to tear it off him as he gripped Alastor’s hips and peppered kisses over his bare stomach. Alastor smoothed his hands over Vox’s back and shoulders and arms and sides and any other area he could reach.

He toyed with Vox’s antennae, teased at his ports, traced his fingers over every knobble in Vox’s spine, and he whined softly when Vox trailed kisses up his chest and lapped at his nipples, sucking and nipping as he wrapped possessive hands around Alastor’s waist.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” Vox hissed as he suddenly fisted Alastor’s hair and dragged him in for a hot, open-mouthed kiss. He ravished Alastor’s mouth before biting his lower lip. “I’ll fight for you, even if it kills me. I’ll always stay by your side. I’ll never leave you ever again, you hear me? You are my *everything*. I’m so fucking proud of you.”

Alastor shivered and wrapped a possessive arm around Vox as his other hand sought out Vox's crotch. He palmed Vox's soft dick through his trousers and Vox inhaled sharply before grinding against Alastor's hand.

"I'm proud of *us*," Alastor whispered against Vox's lips. "Of how far we've come. Of how much we've *healed*." His ears lowered. "I only wish we had more time."

Vox huffed a watery laugh and kissed Alastor's nose as he rocked against his palm. "Sweetheart, if we had the rest of eternity together, it still wouldn't be enough. I'd always want *more*."

Alastor swallowed at Vox's broken smile as the Television Demon humped his hand desperately. Alastor squeezed his dick firmly and Vox stifled a moan before snatching Alastor's hand away and sinking against him, thrusting against his crotch.

Alastor cupped the edge of his screen and kissed him roughly, pleased when Vox tangled their fingers together.

"Let me taste you," Vox breathed before he sunk to his knees and unfastened Alastor's belt and trousers, freeing his surprisingly hard dick from his underwear. When had that happened?

Alastor sucked in a breath when Vox wrapped a hand around his cock and lapped at the head like he was starving for it.

"Fuck," Vox said sincerely before swallowing him down and slowly stroking him as his other fingers gripped his hip tightly.

Alastor watched, mesmerised by Vox's desperate hunger for him, and he snapped his hips upwards when Vox did something particularly pleasant with his tongue. Vox groaned in approval and curled his fingers into both of Alastor's hips, before swallowing Alastor to the hilt.

Alastor gasped at the wet warmth and thrust into Vox's mouth again and Vox made another sound of encouragement as he locked gazes with Alastor. Heat lapped at Alastor's belly as he stared at Vox kneeling between his legs, gaze brimming with desire and lips stretched prettily around Alastor's cock and-

Alastor gripped one of Vox's antenna, laced their fingers together and fucked Vox's mouth.

Vox groaned and whined needily, hips rolling against air as he squeezed Alastor's hand and slid his other hand up Alastor's body to toy with a nipple.

Alastor tossed his head back with a soft moan before locking gazes with Vox. "Look at you," he breathed. "Look how desperate you are. Look how needy you are. You're gorgeous. Perfect. Do you have any idea how much I want you, my love?"

Vox stared at him, entranced, head bobbing on Alastor's cock, tongue working wickedly over it.

"I'm so *lucky* to have you," Alastor continued, sending static skittering through Vox's antenna. "You're so good to me. So patient. I never thought I'd feel this way about anyone again. I thought I was too broken, too soiled to be loved, yet you... You've *healed* me, Vox. Every pain, every fear, every insecurity - you've managed to fix all of them. You take care of me when I need it most and I feel *safe* with you. I trust you in ways I've never trusted anyone. *Love* doesn't do justice to what I feel for you, my dear."

He inhaled sharply when Vox grabbed his foot and pressed it against the tent in his trousers. Then Vox returned to teasing at his nipple as he rocked against Alastor's shoe, eyes fluttering shut in pleasure.

It should have been humiliating; kneeling on the floor, his mouth being used as he humped Alastor's foot like a dog, but Vox appeared to be enjoying himself immensely, so Alastor pressed his foot a little harder against Vox's cock and a blissful whimper fell from Vox's throat.

“Good picturebox,” Alastor sighed, heart filled with adoration for the man below him, and Vox whined around his cock and pinched Alastor’s nipple as he rutted harder against Alastor’s foot.

Alastor squeezed Vox’s hand tightly in encouragement before curiosity got the better of him. “You’re doing so well, Podcast,” he purred. “You’re being so good to me.”

As suspected, Vox pinched his nipple again and sucked wetly at Alastor’s dick with a moan.

Vox liked to be *praised* during sex.

Alastor smirked and teased at the ports at the back of Vox’s head. “You feel amazing, dear. So hot and wet. You make such delicious little whimpers when you’re enjoying yourself. You have no idea how beautiful you look like this.”

Vox’s screen tinged red before he released Alastor’s nipple and removed his shoes. Then he pushed a thumb between the claws of his hoof, against Alastor’s scent gland.

Alastor’s eyes slipped shut. “*Oh*. Vox, you take care of me so well...”

There was the sound of a belt being unbuckled and trousers unzipping, but Alastor was lost in the relaxing sensation of having his foot massaged and his dick sucked so leisurely and-

Something firm and thick wedged between his claws and Alastor looked down curiously, eyes widening at the sight of Vox’s dick thrusting against his hoof, nudging against the gland, smearing Alastor’s scent over his cock and, *fuck*, Vox looked so *desperate*.

Alastor’s eyes flickered to dials as he commanded his shadows to curl around his Television Demon. “That’s it,” purred Alastor hungrily as he raked his gaze over Vox. “Good little television. So eager. So submissive. You make me *ache* for your clever tongue. You make me *yearn* for your wicked fingers.” He pressed his fingers into Vox’s ports, pulsing wave after

wave of static into them until Vox made a choked sound of pleasure, after which, he sunk his other hand into Vox's vents and fingered anything he could find.

Vox *writhed*, fucking Alastor's hoof in earnest as he sucked and licked at his cock.

Alastor arched. "I need you," he panted. "I want you. You always look so damn beautiful and it drives me insane that you don't believe me. How can you be so terribly clever and not see it? Look at yourself, Vox. I can't take my eyes off you. Look at what you're doing to me, look at how *hungry* you make me. Look how exquisite you are."

Vox met his gaze and Alastor noted the wild *need* in his eyes. Alastor grinned and commanded one of his shadows to slide into Vox's ass.

Vox pulled off Alastor's cock with a low groan and Alastor allowed him to catch his breath for a few seconds before gripping his antenna and thrusting roughly into his mouth again.

The Television Demon sucked at him with renewed vigour, lapping and kissing and swallowing him down over and over as he ground into Alastor's scent gland and soon, it was all too much for Alastor and he sent a warning burst of static through Vox's antenna, groaning when Vox sucked harder at him.

He came with a whine and a crackle of static and Vox greedily lapped up every last drop of his release.

"Fucking delicious," Vox managed, voice strained as he licked his lips and jerked his hips against Alastor's shadows and his hoof. Alastor watched Vox's straining dick slide between his claws, the head weeping lightly as he sought friction.

Alastor swallowed. This would likely be the last time they had sex.

"Let me have a taste," he croaked and Vox looked up with wide eyes before Alastor slid onto the carpet with him, pushed him backwards, parted his thighs, and wrapped his lips around

Vox's straining cock, eyes squeezed shut.

"Alastor!" Vox yelped, scrambling to sit upright but falling backwards again when Alastor's shadows thrust inside him.

Alastor's lips stretched around Vox's dick and there was so much heat and Vox was so hard and-

His eyes filled with tears as he was pinned to the floor and his mouth violated over and over as the men took turns on him. His cries were muffled and they groaned harder at his whimpers, so he forced himself to remain quiet-

"Alastor, stop!"

They pulled at his hair and kicked between his legs and spat on his face. Then when they grew bored of that, they rolled him onto his knees and one settled behind him as another stood in front of him and they used him at both ends-

"Alastor, open your eyes. Sweetheart, look at me. You're in the hotel. You're with me. You're not with them."

The forest faded away as they defiled him. They laughed and mocked him but there weren't any twigs biting into his knees anymore, only soft carpet.

Fingers brushed his cheek. "Alastor, you're safe. You're with me. Open your eyes. Look at me."

Everything hurt. His legs trembled from the force of their thrusts and his mouth felt sticky and dirty and full. He opened his eyes, expecting to see a cruel grin, but suddenly the harsh thrusting stopped and he was looking at... Vox? He frowned in confusion. When had Vox arrived?

“That’s it,” Vox whispered, brows pinched with worry. “Relax, Al. Focus on me. What can you hear?”

Birds. Twigs crunching and leaves rustling and filthy groans and- No. No, he couldn’t hear any of that. He could hear... fans. Vox’s fans. The quiet hum of electronics.

“What can you smell?”

Urine. Sweat. Alcohol. Earth- No. Carpet cleaner. Sea salt. Copper. Ozone.

“...What can you taste?”

Semen. Cigarettes. Liquor. He frowned in confusion. No. That wasn’t right. He could taste... strawberries?

He blinked, breaths slowing, and he lapped at whatever tasted so strongly of strawberries. Vox blew out a shaky breath, one hand caressing Alastor’s cheek and the other rubbing his knuckles. “You back with me?”

Alastor nodded slowly as he pulled off whatever Vox had given him and he glanced down to see... Vox's glowing dick?

"Strawberries," Alastor said carefully. "Why can I taste strawberries?"

Vox smiled sheepishly. "Uh... surprise?"

Alastor blinked and stared at Vox's weeping dick. His ears pricked up curiously. "...You taste of strawberries?"

His tail wiggled and he leaned down to lap at Vox's cock again.

Vox caught his chin. "Hold on. I lost you for a moment there. Just... slow down."

"I'm fine," mumbled Alastor. "I can do this. I want to do this."

"I know you do," Vox said gently. "But slow down. What just happened?"

"Flashback," Alastor said impatiently. "It's fine. You pulled me out of it. Vox, please--"

"Al, relax. There's no rush," Vox said quietly and Alastor bristled, gritting his teeth.

"Except there *is*!" he hissed. "Because this might be the last time I get to be with you like this and I still can't let you- I can't give you-" He cut himself off and growled before his ears dropped and he looked at Vox sadly. "I want to give you more than praise and a gentle touch. I want to do for you what you do for me. I want to make you feel... good."

Vox stroked his ear. "You do, Al. You always make me feel good."

Alastor curled his fingers around Vox's thighs. "Please, Vox. Let me try. If not for you, let me do it to wash the taste of them from my tongue."

Vox's face went through a number of expressions before settling on resignation. "Okay," he said softly. "But take it slow and keep your eyes on me."

Alastor trailed long fingers down Vox's stomach and inside one of his thighs as Vox petted his ear. He leaned down to pepper kisses over Vox's thighs, gaze locked on Vox's and Vox smiled in approval and traced over his jaw with a finger.

Alastor hummed at the gentle affection and nuzzled Vox's cock. "Why strawberries?"

"Makes it more pleasant for my partner," Vox said lightly as he grazed his thumb over Alastor's cheek bone. "I can make it taste of anything I like. Modified myself a little while ago to see if it would entice Val to touch-" He halted himself abruptly with a grimace and a potent combination of jealousy and fury bubbled up inside Alastor.

"You don't need to modify yourself to keep me interested," Alastor growled. "You're perfect the way you are." He licked a long stripe up Vox's cock and the Television Demon inhaled sharply.

Alastor kissed the tip of his dick. "Was he the last person to touch you like this?" Alastor asked lowly, *dangerously*, and Vox nodded.

Alastor narrowed his eyes and held Vox's gaze as he wrapped his lips around his cock and sunk down on him. He pulled off with a soft *pop* and licked his weeping head.

"We'll fix that," Alastor whispered and Vox's fans sped up as he fisted Alastor's hair.

Alastor laved his tongue over Vox's shaft, dark gaze fixed on Vox's. Vox gasped when Alastor sucked two fingers, recalled his shadows, and pushed them deep inside his hole. Vox made a breathy noise and lifted his hips and Alastor nipped at his thigh.

"You're *mine*," he growled and Vox nodded frantically, free hand seeking out Alastor's and lacing their fingers together.

Alastor kissed Vox's dick before swallowing him down again and Vox trembled as he watched.

"Fuck, that feels incredible," Vox choked out as Alastor worked his dick and ass together. "Better than anything Val ever did-" Again, Vox snapped his mouth shut and Alastor looked at him sharply. He curled his fingers inside Vox in reprimand and Vox arched, jerking his hips upwards into Alastor's mouth and making him gag.

"Sorry," Vox said quickly as Alastor pulled off him with flat ears.

Alastor hesitated, unease settling in his stomach as he stared at Vox's thick, straining, weeping cock.

"Hey, look at me," Vox said softly as he caught Alastor's jaw and tilted his head up. "Give me a colour."

Alastor closed his eyes in frustration. "Yellow," he mumbled.

Vox carded a hand through his hair and carefully pulled Alastor's fingers out of him and dragged him up his body. Alastor buried his face in Vox's chest in humiliation.

His breath hitched when Vox's hand closed around his dick and began pumping him slowly, lazily, as Vox's other hand stroked his back and tail.

After a few minutes, Alastor's dick twitched and he rutted leisurely into Vox's fist.

"That's it," purred Vox. "That feel good, sweetheart?"

Alastor nodded, cheeks heating as he kept his face buried in Vox's chest. Once he was half-mast again, Vox kissed his ear. "Fuck me, Al. Make me come without touching my dick."

Alastor's face *burned* and Vox chuckled and caught his chin, forcing him to look up. "If you don't move in the next five seconds, I'm gonna have to take charge."

Alastor stared at him in confusion and Vox grinned and rolled him onto his back, summoned a condom and strawberry-flavoured lube - Vox *clearly* liked strawberries, Alastor would remember that - and seated himself on Alastor's dick.

A breathy noise escaped Alastor as he gripped Vox's hips and Vox's smile widened as he began to *bounce*.

A groan was punched out of Alastor and Vox bent down to swallow it, kissing Alastor filthily as he rolled his hips.

Alastor reached for Vox's cock but was quickly swatted away and his wrists pinned either side of his head.

"Ah ah ah," teased Vox. "No touching. Find another way to make me come, Radio Demon."

Alastor blinked up at him before grinning wickedly and commanding his shadows to slide into every port and vent on Vox's body before he pulsed wave after wave of heated static into each one, merciless and overwhelming as his shadows infiltrated deeper and deeper inside Vox.

“Fuck!” Vox choked out in surprise, back arching as he lost his grip on Alastor’s wrists. Alastor quickly pulled himself and every shadow out of Vox all at once and shoved him onto his hands and knees, grimacing a little at Vox’s grief-stricken whine.

He grabbed Vox’s hips, kneeled behind him, and fucked into him deeply as his shadows took up their previous positions, filling every port and vent.

Vox whimpered and wrapped a hand around his dick and Alastor snatched it away with a chuckle, locking his hands over both of Vox’s.

“Ah ah ah, no touching,” he purred and Vox arched into Alastor’s body with a moan.

“Harder,” Vox begged as Alastor mantled himself over his back. “Hold me and fuck me harder.”

Alastor wrapped an arm tightly around Vox’s stomach and snapped his hips against Vox’s ass. He nipped Vox’s shoulder.

“Did you think of me when you were with him?” Alastor whispered into his shoulder.

Vox nodded desperately. “Yes. All the time. Every time.”

“Good little television,” Alastor praised and Vox’s breaths shook. “Did you ever call my name when you were with him?”

Again, Vox nodded. “A few times. He got so pissy about it.”

Alastor hummed in satisfaction. “Good man. Do you want me to make you come?”

“Fuck yes,” Vox gasped and Alastor smirked and suddenly squeezed the base of Vox’s dick, stopping his release. Vox cried out.

“Tell me how gorgeous you are first,” drawled Alastor and Vox whimpered, arms trembling.

“Alastor-”

“Tell me,” teased Alastor.

“...I’m gorgeous,” Vox choked out.

“Wonderful. Tell me you’re worthy of love,” Alastor drawled.

“I’m worthy of love,” Vox said, a little quicker.

“Perfect. Tell me your body deserves to be worshipped.”

“My body deserves to be worshipped,” Vox said without hesitation and Alastor kissed the thick scar on his shoulder that Valentino had caused.

“Good. Tell me that you aren’t a machine.”

Vox was a little slower to respond. “I’m not a machine.”

Alastor squeezed his dick harder. “Again.”

“...I’m not a machine.”

Alastor nipped his neck. “Convince me,” he growled. “Convince me to let you come, because machines don’t need to. Why shouldn’t I just leave you like this, Vox? Needy and desperate and on the edge. Why should I care about a *machine*?”

Vox gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut as Alastor thrust into him ruthlessly.

“Because I’m not a fucking machine!” Vox snarled, filters glitching. “Because I have components and wires but I can still feel *everything* everyone does to me. I can still hurt and grieve and laugh and *love*. Because I’m *not* a bunch of rusted spare parts welded together and I’ve got a human heart and I’m not some fucking *robot* to be modified and updated whenever someone gets bored of me. I’m not a toy to be dismantled and stored in someone’s closet for two fucking *weeks* because they think they *own* me. I’m a fucking *person* and I- I-”

“And what?” Alastor growled, squeezing Vox’s hand tightly as he nuzzled into the back of his screen. Vox lowered his head with a choked sob, a tear dripping off the edge of his screen. “Say it,” Alastor demanded.

“And I’m not fucking worthless!” Vox hissed fiercely. “I’m not disgusting or pathetic or vile! *You* love me so I *can’t* be. I’m fucking *worthy* of being loved and adored. I’m worthy of *you*, Alastor.”

“Good boy,” Alastor whispered as he released Vox’s cock and plunged his fingers into his vents instead, and Vox tossed his head back with a broken moan as he came.

Alastor milked him through his pleasure and continued to thrust into him and when Vox began to whimper at the overstimulation, Alastor’s pleasure washed over him.

He collapsed onto his side with a moan, pulling Vox with him and wrapping both arms tightly around his shuddering frame as he curled around him protectively.

Vox cried quietly, hunching in on himself.

Alastor peppered kisses over his shoulders. “I’m so proud of you,” he whispered. “You did so well.” He rubbed Vox’s stomach, tossing a leg over his hip. “Easy, my love. You’re alright.”

Vox covered his screen with his hands, hiding his face as Alastor’s shadows receded and Alastor pulled out of him carefully. His sobbing grew more wrecked.

Alastor cuddled closer. “Hush, darling. I’m right here. I’ve got you.”

“I love you so fucking much,” Vox whimpered between sobs. “Al, no one has ever... I’ve never felt...” He flinched. “This is the first time I’ve ever *believed* any of that shit.”

A grin swept slowly across Alastor’s face and he squeezed Vox affectionately.

Vox huffed out a watery laugh, which was quickly followed by a broken sob. “Shit, I don’t know how to feel. I think you literally fucked my brain out.”

Brain. Not processor.

Alastor’s grin widened and his tail fluffed happily. “Consider it a gift for pulling me out of my flashback! That has never happened to me before.”

Vox’s hands closed around his, frequency nestling contentedly against Alastor’s. “You’re fucking amazing,” muttered Vox with a weak laugh. Suddenly, he rolled over in Alastor’s grip and smirked at him as he snaked his arms around him. “You got *jealous*.”

Alastor blinked slowly. “Oh? I don’t recall.”

“You got jealous over *Val*,” Vox teased.

Alastor smiled lazily. “My dear, I have *nothing* to be jealous of. Your heart *never* belonged to him.”

“Sap,” drawled Vox as he cupped Alastor’s cheek.

His smile faded.

“I don’t want to lose this,” he whispered.

Alastor’s ears lowered and he stroked Vox’s side. “Then we *must* beat those trials.”

“Al...”

“Promise me you won’t give up,” Alastor murmured. “Promise me that no matter what you face up there, no matter what you see or hear, you will think back to this moment and you’ll *remember* why you can’t give up. We have so much to live for, Vox.”

Vox’s lips twitched into a ghost of a smile. “I will.”

“I love you,” Alastor said solemnly. “Remember that. Our past will be used against us but please remember that I will always love you. I need you, Vox. You make me stronger. You make me happy.”

Vox swallowed and tugged Alastor flush against him. “...Do you forgive me? For all of our fights and the shit we said and did to each other?”

“Of course I do,” Alastor said softly. “We’re past all that.”

“Fifty years is a long time,” Vox muttered. “We fought far longer than we were *friends*.”

“And I missed you through every second,” Alastor said gently as he rubbed Vox’s shoulder. “Do you forgive me?”

“Obviously,” Vox huffed as he petted Alastor’s tail. “I kept calling your name when I was in bed with Val. Doesn’t sound too impressive until you realise I did it for *fifty years*.”

Alastor chuckled. “...Is that why you have a body pillow of me?”

Vox growled. “There’s no body pillow. Velvette likes to make crap up to annoy me.”

Alastor pulsed playful static into Vox’s shoulder before pressing a sweet kiss to his screen, causing him to go cross-eyed for a moment. When he pulled back, Vox’s pupils were shaped like hearts.

His tail fluffed and Vox made a pleased sound as he toyed with it.

“You’re right,” Alastor whispered after a moment. “I can’t beat the trials alone. But I think we have a chance together.”

“And you’re right about Roo. She’s going to destroy us anyway, so we might as well give Lucifer a chance to rally an angelic army,” said Vox. “The last thing Hell needs is more misery and torture.” He paused and scowled. “Damn, I think Charlie’s redemption kink is starting to rub off on us.”

Alastor snorted. “I don’t think either of us would fit very well in Heaven.” He snuggled against Vox. “Besides, I’m quite happy here, thank you.”

Vox hummed and squeezed Alastor adoringly as he peppered kisses over Alastor’s hair. After a few moments, he made a curious sound.

“Hey, should I wipe the CCTV footage in here? Think they’ve caught us from four different angles.”

Alastor considered the question for a moment before kissing Vox’s chest with a smirk.

“If anyone wants to see it, let them. It’ll be more entertaining than any of Valentino’s films.”

Vox barked out a laugh. “You have a possessive streak about as subtle as a brick to the face.”

“And you,” Alastor drawled, “fucking *love* it.”

Vox beamed. “I love that you show me off at every damn opportunity. I’m not used to it.”

“And why shouldn’t I?” Alastor purred, curling his fingers into Vox’s ports. “Televisions are the centrepiece of a room and mine is better than everyone else’s.”

Vox grinned. “Personally, I prefer the more elegant radio. Sometimes, I even take mine to bed with me.”

Alastor snickered at the double entendre and nipped Vox’s collar bone before tucking his head under his screen with a happy sigh.

If they were going to die in Purgatory, at least they would have this moment.

Roo could never take that away from them.

They halted at the edge of the rubble, seeking out each other's hands as fear swept over them both like a tidal wave.

The street was dark and the lamps here had long since stopped lighting. The rest of the buildings were boarded up or half destroyed. A cool breeze grazed the backs of their necks and they swallowed in unison.

Finally, they shuffled onto the peak of the rubble, looking up at the sky and the pentagram glowing eerily above them.

Vox slid an arm around Alastor, tucking him against his side and it gave Alastor the strength to hold his head up and narrow his eyes.

"We'll compete in your trials and free you on the condition that you release Charlie and break our chains once we complete them. You'll let us all go and you'll leave us alone if we do this for you."

Vox stooped down and scooped up what appeared to be Charlie's cracked phone and... a tuft of white fur?

The breeze grew a little colder.

"Lucifer won't free you," Alastor said. "We're your best hope at escape, but we won't help you if you don't agree to the terms."

There was a hint of a chuckle in the breeze and Vox held Alastor tighter to him. He could hear the Television Demon's fans whirring faster in anxiety.

"Better hurry," growled Alastor. "Lucifer is gathering an army."

The wind picked up, snatching the white fur from Vox's fingers.

"Well? Do you want us to free you or not?" Alastor challenged.

"You won't win, little fawn," came a breathy whisper. "You've grown too *soft*."

"If that's how you feel, we'll leave," Alastor drawled and he splayed a hand over Vox's back as he led him down the rubble.

"Deal," came the hushed whisper and Vox and Alastor's hands flew to their throats as their chains shimmered into existence.

They were dragged backwards into the void.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: A couple of the italic sections have memories of Alastor's rape.

The final act is upon us! Welcome to Purgatory, people!

Chapter 53: Fury - Pt. I

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Vox onlined slowly and with a pounding headache.

It took a moment for his cameras to adjust to the inky darkness and another moment for his spacial awareness to kick in when there was no *floor*.

The next thing he noticed was Alastor hunched over him, teeth bared and ears flat and dials flickering in his eyes.

“Fuck you!” Alastor snarled and Vox flinched and checked his arm for whichever trial he had been launched into.

Alastor caught the movement from the corner of his eye and glanced down at Vox, gaze softening. He brushed his fingers down Vox’s face and Vox exhaled in relief.

“Those are the terms,” whispered a voice like the wind and Vox suddenly felt very cold and small. He clutched Alastor’s coat and Alastor laid a hand over his heart before he bared his teeth at the darkness around them.

“No,” he growled. “No deal.”

“Then I won’t break your chains.”

“Then we won’t compete,” Alastor snarled and Roo laughed softly.

“Sweet fawn, you have no choice. Either compete or be destroyed.”

Alastor’s fingers curled against Vox’s chest. “Do you have any idea what that *monster* did to him?”

Another condescending laugh. “Of course. I fed well off your fear and their pain.”

Vox placed a hand over Alastor’s, raising an eyebrow in query and Alastor looked devastated for a moment before shaking his head.

“I won’t let him. I’ll *destroy* him and the chain will break!”

“You can’t break an eternal chain, stupid fawn.”

Alastor gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut as he shook his head. “You’re lying. There’s no such thing.”

“Are you sure?”

Alastor’s ears lowered and he glanced worriedly at Vox before casting his gaze to the darkness once more. “Why? Why ask for that? What difference does it make to you?”

“It means I keep my end of a bargain. Valentino has been rather... helpful to me.”

Vox’s blood turned to ice and he sat up, glancing wildly at Alastor. “Valentino?” Vox asked the darkness. “What do you mean he’s been ‘helpful’?”

“Ask your *darling buck*. ”

Vox glanced at Alastor, noticing how he had yet to remove his hand from his chest.

“Valentino has regenerated,” Alastor muttered angrily. “He was the one who grabbed Charlie.”

Vox’s eyes widened. “*What?* ”

“Charlie didn’t come to Purgatory *willingly*, ” Alastor growled. “She stayed by the edge of the rubble to strike a deal with Roo, making sure she was out of reach. Valentino *ambushed* her. He dragged her into the rubble and Roo tried to take her, but Charlie is powerful, like her father. She fought back. She would have escaped had Valentino not hit her over the head with a rock. He was the one who sent the text.”

Vox swallowed, mouth falling open for a moment, at a loss for words.

“Apparently, Valentino made a deal with Roo,” Alastor said lowly, antlers rising. “He would help Roo escape on the condition that if we beat the trials, Roo would transfer ownership of your soul to *him*. ”

“What the *fuck?* ” Vox breathed, chest tight with anxiety. “What the... No, why would he...?” His face glitched, sparks jumping between his antennae. “*What the fuck?!* ”

“You knew we were coming,” Alastor growled at the void. “This was all planned.”

A soft chuckle. “Not quite. I saw you two growing closer. You kept failing my orders so I figured once you were comfortable enough with each other, I’d drag you both back here and see if you could beat the trials and free me. You outgrew your usefulness. But then I had another idea. Why not make you seek help from the sweet, optimistic, naive princess?”

The air grew colder and Vox felt a sense of hopelessness and anguish wash over him. Alastor grimaced, obviously feeling it too.

“So, I threw you both around a little. Turned you into my funny puppets. And as predicted, you ran straight to the king and his daughter. Miss *Bleeding Heart* couldn’t resist helping you, could she? She was so upset when her father *failed*. She had to speak to me *urgently*...”

“And I suppose Valentino didn’t take much convincing?” Alastor growled. “He’d do anything to get his hands on Vox.”

“Isn’t it charming?” Roo purred. “He’s so in love!”

“That isn’t love,” Vox hissed. “It’s *obsession*.”

“You’re wrong,” Roo teased. “He’s very much in love with you, in his own twisted way. You broke his heart, little picturebox. He’s only trying to win you back.”

“He chopped me up and now he wants control of my soul?” Vox growled. “It’s *abuse*.”

“It’s the only way he knows how to love,” Roo whispered. “And you weren’t patient enough or kind enough to teach him anything else. In fact, your cruelty solidified his broken view of love. You *made* him into what he is. You taught him that love is violent and painful. You taught him that he is worthless; a stupid *whore*.”

Vox snapped his mouth shut, eyes blowing wide. Finally, he shook his head. “No. No, I didn’t. Val... He made *me* feel worthless. He was the one who abused me. He was the violent one.”

“You asked for it.”

“No,” Vox said. “I didn’t. I didn’t ask for all that. I didn’t ask to be humiliated and degraded and treated like *shit*. ”

“Neither did he, but that didn’t stop you. And unlike you, Valentino didn’t know how to say *no*. He did whatever you wanted. Anything to please his beloved television - the man who always treated him as second best. You say he saw you as a machine, but it wasn’t always like that, was it? He once worshipped the ground you walked on. Tell me, Vox, did you ever see him as anything more than a sad and pathetic whore?”

Vox flinched, falling quiet.

“Of course he did,” Alastor snarled. “He gave Valentino a job and a place to stay. He saw *potential* in Valentino and that moth threw it all away! Vox changed how he saw Valentino because *Valentino* changed.”

“Did he?” Roo purred. “Or was it all a mask to protect himself? Perhaps he *did* cry for help and you both ignored it...”

Alastor scowled as Vox’s heart sank. No, Valentino *had* changed, right? It wasn’t their fault that he had become so violent and cruel... right?

“He chopped Vox up and hid him in his closet!” Alastor roared.

Roo chuckled. “Temper, temper, sweet fawn. Now, do we have a deal?”

“No,” snarled Alastor. “If you think I’ll let Vox get abused by that filthy insect again-”

“I wasn’t asking you,” Roo said airily. “It isn’t *your* soul to give. Vox?”

Vox frowned.

“How about I make this easier for you?” Roo asked. “If you don’t agree to giving Valentino your soul, I’ll destroy this useless princess, just like I did her mother.”

They both startled as a familiar corpse popped into existence a few feet in front of them. It floated lightly, perfectly fixed in a sleeping position.

Alastor and Vox looked at each other warily before slowly edging towards the figure.

Vox’s heart clenched as he looked into the lifeless eyes of Queen Lilith.

Her elegant dress was torn and frayed and her skin bore multiple bruises. There was a long, open wound at her neck, stretching from one ear to the other like a second mouth.

“I had higher hopes for the Queen of Hell,” whispered Roo. “But it took only a few months for her to accept defeat. To extinguish herself.”

Vox looked away, nauseated.

“She was quite alone,” continued Roo, as though they were discussing the weather. “A broken marriage and an absent mother to her daughter... She couldn’t make it past two trials.”

Vox sought Alastor’s hand. If the Queen of Hell couldn’t complete the trials, what chance did two mere sinners have?

“She fought at first, mind you,” said Roo. “She was frustratingly clever. When I dragged her here eight years ago, it became quite apparent that Lucifer hadn’t revealed much to her about Purgatory and so I shackled her into a contract. She could have her freedom if she brought Lucifer to me.”

There was a dark chuckle. “But despite their crumbling marriage, Lilith wasn’t ready to betray her husband. So, once I released her, she fled to Heaven and told them of her contract, and the other Archangels placed her under their *protection*. They imprisoned her, and for seven *years*, I couldn’t reach her.”

An icy wind whipped around them and Alastor snaked an arm around Vox, pulling him close.

“And then Adam died. And everything *changed*. That heartbroken, idiotic second-in-command of his disobeyed Archangel orders and dragged Lilith out of her protection programme and straight through one of the *cracks* in Heaven. An accident, of course; how could she have known? The Archangels and Seraphims are so... secretive. I *plucked* Lilith from Heaven and brought her here for her disobedience and... well... It was all rather disappointing.”

Alastor’s eyes widened. “...That’s why you left us alone after the fight with Adam. You were feeding off the Queen of Hell.”

Vox stiffened as the epiphany struck. “And that’s how you got so strong. How you were able to possess us both and throw us around like that.”

A low chuckle. “Lucifer told you that you were my only chains, didn’t he? How sad that he didn’t know his own wife was on one. No wonder the other Archangels won’t speak to him - especially now they’ve *lost* her...”

Alastor and Vox fell silent, dread filling their stomachs. Would Lucifer be able to rally the other Archangels now they were too *afraid* to admit they had lost his wife? If he found out what they had done, would he even *want* to work with them?

Suddenly, the prospect of an Archangel army didn’t look too hopeful.

“Shit,” muttered Vox as he curled his fingers into Alastor’s coat. If they completed the trials, Roo would be set free and if they didn’t, Lucifer would set her free, and there would be *nothing* to stop her from taking over Hell, Heaven, and Earth.

“I’ll ask you again,” Roo purred, clearly amused. “Give up your soul to Valentino, or I destroy the princess? It’s your choice, Picturebox.”

Vox hesitated and Alastor looked at him helplessly. “Fine,” Vox muttered after a moment. “Val can have my soul.”

“Interesting,” said Roo. “Your answer would have been different a few months ago. Your values have changed since you reconnected with Alastor.”

Vox ignored her and focused on rubbing Alastor’s back, easing the tension between his shoulders. Alastor was grinding his teeth.

“You’ve both changed,” Roo continued with a hum. “I wonder how that’ll affect your trials?”

They stilled, glancing at each other worriedly.

“Is there anyone you’d like to join you?” Roo asked.

They held each other a fraction tighter. “No,” they murmured.

She made a noise of amusement. “Very well. Good luck.”

An enormous set of double gates flickered into view, lit by floodlights and supported by thick stone pillars.

Vox and Alastor shared a nervous glance before lacing their hands together and stepping through the gates.

They grimaced at the feeling of knives tearing through their flesh and they dropped their gazes to their wrists and the letters carved there.

Fury.

Vox's mouth drew into a thin line and he looked to Alastor only to realise he was alone. His antennae crackled with anxiety.

"You said we could do this together!" Vox yelled into the darkness.

He received no response.

Panic clawed at his chest. All that talk of completing the trials together, of helping each other to beat them, and a few seconds after stepping through the gates, they had been ripped apart?

Vox's fans whirled faster as his breaths grew quick and shallow. He hadn't been able to beat even one trial last time! Shit! He was going to *die*. If the Queen of Hell couldn't get through the trials, what chance did he have? And even if he did miraculously beat them, Valentino would gain ownership of his soul and he would be ripped away from Alastor *again* and-

"Val, no!"

Vox froze and cast his gaze to... Velvette?

She was a little distance away, inside a room with only three walls - like a dollhouse or the stage of a theatre. The room looked suspiciously like Valentino's bedroom and as Vox approached it, Valentino stepped out from behind the open wardrobe, fists clenched and Velvette's phone in one hand.

Velvette backed away from him, a bruise forming on her cheek. She held a hand up to protect her face. "Get away from me, you sick monster!"

“You weren’t supposed to find out,” Valentino said angrily before he grimaced and held his head. He lowered his fists as Velvette’s influential power took root in his mind, and Velvette crept towards him and reached for her phone.

He opened a red eye and struck her hard with the device and she crumpled onto the floor with a cry of pain. He raised his fists again and she cowered from him, attempting to crawl away.

“You’re a fucking psychopath!” she spat. “You’ve *dismembered* him!”

“He isn’t *dead*. I’m going to put him back together!” Valentino said wildly before he ran a hand through his good antenna. “I just... need more time to make him perfect. And then we’ll be happy. I *know* we can be happy.”

Velvette eyed the door and suddenly glowered at Valentino again. He made a noise of pain as he held his head and doubled over, and Velvette scrambled to her feet and sprinted towards the door.

Valentino pulled a gun from his pocket.

“No!” Vox yelled as he raced towards them.

Bang.

Velvette screamed and collapsed to the floor, holding her left shoulder, and Valentino stalked towards her and dragged her away from the door.

She kicked out at him viciously and tried her power on him again as she crawled towards the door, but he hit her with the butt of his gun and threw her against the wall. She groaned and he swallowed, running his fingers through his antenna again before plucking the whip from the dresser.

Vox pushed himself faster. He was almost there.

Valentino prowled towards Velvette and she looked up at him angrily before she caught sight of the whip and fear trickled into her gaze.

“Val, please,” she whispered. “I’m your partner. Your friend. Just... let me get Vox some help and then everything can go back to normal...”

“You think I’m a monster,” Valentino whispered. “But you... You don’t understand. Vox is *fine*. He’s made of spare parts. A machine. Machines can be *fixed*. I’ve not done anything *wrong*. I’ll put him back together. He can be stored more easily this way and I can reach the parts I need to and-” He cut himself off at Velvette’s horrified expression.

He scowled and raised the whip. “You’ll run to Alastor. You were already on the phone to him. I can’t have you getting him involved. Not yet.”

He struck her once, twice, three times and she cried in agony, huddling in on herself as her skin bruised and tore.

“Get the fuck away from her!” Vox roared as he bounded into the room and pounced upon Valentino.

Velvette snapped her gaze up in shock and Valentino screamed as Vox delivered enough charge to kill him.

Valentino fell to the ground, smoking, and suddenly, the room melted away and Vox found himself in an Overlord meeting, watching from the back of the room.

...Watching *himself* deliberate over whether to sit beside Valentino and Velvette or to take the seat beside Alastor.

He wasn't hidden, but no one seemed to have noticed that there were *two* of him, and he watched in confusion as the other version of himself pulled out the seat beside Alastor and slung an arm around the back of his chair.

Across the table, Valentino clenched his fists. "Vox," he warned.

"Val," the other version of himself responded coolly.

Wait, Vox remembered this. This was a memory - a memory he was watching from a different perspective. He approached the table, glancing at everyone's faces to see if they noticed him, but no one so much as blinked at him. He touched the table, wondering whether he would phase through it, but the table was solid and he recoiled in surprise.

He rounded the table and touched the shoulder of the nearest Overlord - some sort of frog demon - and although she was warm and *moist* beneath his fingers, she didn't look at him.

Strange. Unlike the bedroom scene, he couldn't interact with this one. He checked his wrist.
Fury.

So, he was still in the same trial?

He pulled a face and wandered over to himself curiously, ignoring the conversation and smiling when he watched himself tangle his fingers with Alastor's in full view of everyone.

Valentino leapt out of his seat. "The only reason that *bastard* is paying you attention is because he's a fucking coward who needs protection now that everyone knows he's rapeable!"

The words filled him with as much fury as they had the day Valentino had actually said them, and as the other version of himself vaulted over the table, Vox jabbed a finger in Valentino's

direction, the tip phasing through the other version of himself. “Fuck you, you piece of shit!”

And suddenly, everyone was looking at him.

And he was halfway across the table, his claw grazing Valentino’s throat.

He raised his eyebrows and looked around for the other version of himself, only to realise that he was the only one.

Woah. Trippy.

Valentino bared his teeth at him. “The fuck did you just say to me?”

Vox blinked at him and felt a little foolish as he kneeled in the middle of the table, everyone’s eyes on him. “Uh...”

Valentino grabbed him by his collar and dragged him the rest of the way across the table, then dumped him in the seat between him and Velvete.

Vox froze, staring at a wide-eyed Alastor and Rosie.

...This wasn’t what happened. He should have Valentino pinned by now, the lights flickering and Velvete begging him to let Valentino go as Alastor held her back.

“Vox,” Alastor said quietly, *worriedly*, and Vox glanced up at him before tensing when Valentino draped an arm around his shoulders.

“What’s wrong, little doe?” Valentino growled. “Feeling vulnerable without your *bodyguard*? Maybe if you go suck a Hellhound’s cock, they might protect you from all the sinners who

are desperate for a piece of that flat ass.”

Alastor reared backwards, ears low, and anger bubbled in Vox’s gut when Valentino smirked.

“Vox is *mine*, Radio Bitch.”

Vox balled up his fist and socked Valentino in the mouth. “The fuck I am!” He wrapped his hands around Valentino’s throat and gathered a charge, and the lights flickered and flashed as he poured electricity into Valentino’s frame.

The room dissolved, taking Valentino and Alastor and Rosie and everyone apart from Vox with it.

He was suddenly in his own room in V-Tower, watching Alastor hold another version of himself from behind, one hand splayed over his stomach and the other playing with the ports at the back of his head. They were speaking in low tones and the memory came to Vox quickly.

This was the day they reviewed the commercial for the hotel. Vox had yet to reveal his body to Alastor and he had panicked when Alastor asked to see it. He hadn’t re-installed his antennae after Valentino had broken them and Alastor had made a point about how much he missed them, about how much he appreciated Vox’s static and frequency and the ports at the back of his head.

Vox smiled fondly. They hadn’t long formed their truce. They were still tiptoeing around each other, learning how to trust one another again, learning about each other’s insecurities and fears.

The doors flew open and Valentino’s face soured when he spotted them. “The fuck is this?” he growled as Alastor withdrew from Vox. “Are you *fucking* this piece of shit now?”

Irritation simmered inside Vox, similar to the day the events had played out.

“We were talking, you ass. And you were supposed to wait upstairs. I can’t just drop everything every time you have a temper tantrum. I’m busy,” he heard the other version of him say.

Valentino grinned sharply. “I didn’t realise that sucking the Radio Demon’s cock counted as work.” His gaze shifted to Alastor and he sneered. “Maybe we should share the load.”

Vox rolled his eyes and propped himself against the wall as he studied Valentino.

What exactly was he supposed to do here? Why was he being shown glimpses of the past? What was he supposed to learn? Because it felt like he was watching a slideshow of all the reasons Valentino pissed him off.

He jumped as one of Alastor’s shadows slammed Valentino against the wall. He cast his gaze to the struggling Valentino before losing interest and looking around the room.

Fury.

So, what? Was he supposed to overcome his fury or something? Fury at what? And where was Alastor? Was he also completing a trial or did he have to wait for Vox to finish his? How did it work?

“I hope they fucked you bloody.”

And there it was. Reason number 573 why Valentino infuriated him. He turned and idly watched himself fry the moth-demon.

“Piece of shit!” The antennae-less version of him roared as Valentino crumpled to the floor with a cry of agony. Before he could ready another attack, Velvette stepped between them.

He let the following argument flow over his head as he crossed his arms and looked down at Valentino in disdain. He shrank away from the other Vox, baring his teeth like a frightened animal as they snapped insults at one another.

“Better than being a fucking *rapist* like you!”

Valentino flinched backwards before he sprang to his feet and flared his wings - one of his favourite intimidation tactics. “I can’t wait for her to drag your pathetic ass back to Purgatory. I hope those trials destroy you.”

Vox scowled. He may very well get his wish.

Velvette used her power on them and when the other Vox and Alastor headed back to the hotel, the scene faded away once more.

He looked around the dark void and his gaze landed on an old television with a VCR beneath it. Vox tilted his head curiously and approached it. Placed on top of the VCR was an unmarked video. Vox picked it up and inspected it carefully before placing it into the VCR.

The screen flared to life and Vox watched another part of his past play out - this time one of his and Valentino’s fights with Alastor, long before their truce, before Alastor had vanished for seven years.

“You have a lot of nerve showing your face around here, Radio Demon.”

“Excuse me?”

“The Entertainment District is Vox’s domain. You’d do well to remember that.”

“I’m in no mood for such childish games, Valentino. Best be on your way now.”

Vox watched the scene play out, grimacing when two bullets tore through Alastor's shoulder and stomach and again when he electrocuted Alastor to seal both wounds. Alastor hadn't known he was trying to help and Vox had hypnotised him to keep him from attacking Valentino again. Alastor had looked so *afraid*.

The clip ended with him carrying Valentino to V-Tower and Vox startled when a door behind the television - one that definitely hadn't been there moments before - opened into Valentino's bedroom.

Vox frowned and crept inside and watched the resulting argument between a younger version of himself and Valentino progress.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" the younger him snarled at Valentino and the moth-demon at least had the decency to grimace.

"I just... I saw him and I got angry," Valentino mumbled and sparks danced between Vox's antennae.

"So you challenged him? You know how powerful he is! I wouldn't have been able to beat him if I hadn't caught him off-guard."

Valentino frowned, lip curling into a sneer before he glared at Vox. "If it wasn't for him, you'd be free."

The fight drained from Vox and after a moment, he sighed. "He could have killed you. You'd have lost everything; your power, your Overlord status... It might take you weeks to regenerate after he's finished with you."

Valentino looked away moodily. "Should have shot him in the head."

Vox scowled before gripping Valentino's chin firmly and forcing him to meet his gaze. "You don't challenge him again, you hear me? You stay away from him."

Valentino blinked in surprise before baring his teeth at Vox and shoving at him.

"I'm trying to protect you," Vox's younger self grumbled and Valentino cast him a withering look as he reached the door.

"You're trying to protect *him*."

He slammed the door shut and the older Vox leapt out of the frame just in time to spare his screen from a nasty accident.

He blinked in surprise as Valentino marched into the dark void, form glowing slightly before flickering and fading away.

Weird.

A flash of red caught his attention and he turned, heart racing as he caught sight of a familiar figure peering through the window of a house suspended amidst the darkness.

Alastor's old house.

"Alastor!" Vox yelled excitedly and he raced through the void, beaming when Alastor whirled around, ears pricked up.

He skidded to a halt in front of Alastor and dragged his lover into a bone-crushing hug and Alastor held him tightly in return before pulling back and placing a finger over his lips, then gesturing inside the house.

Vox crouched beside him below the sill, squinting at the scene of a much younger Alastor and Valentino arguing and fighting. Their emotions were clearly visible over their faces since they had yet to learn how to hide them properly, and it seemed that Alastor had the upper hand until Valentino surged forwards and kissed him. They struggled and Vox gasped as Valentino set a gun against Alastor's stomach, but he hesitated and Alastor lashed out.

Their attacks were restrained and hesitant and Valentino gained the advantage again, pinning Alastor to the floor and kissing him once more.

Fury burned inside Vox but as he bounced to his feet, Valentino pulled back with wide, distraught eyes and Vox froze.

Something was wrong.

He knew that look. That was a genuinely terrified Valentino.

He didn't want to do this.

What-

Alastor tapped his shoulder and Vox turned to see a very young version of himself materialise on the doorstep.

He remembered this.

This was the start of it all.

The downfall of their friendship.

The first time Alastor attacked him.

The first time he had blinded him.

The first time Alastor abandoned him.

Nausea rolled around Vox's stomach and he staggered as the memories crashed over him, sharp and painful.

An arm snaked around his stomach, catching him before he collapsed.

"I've got you," Alastor whispered.

That's right. Alastor was... Alastor was here now. Alastor wouldn't leave him again. They were past all this. They loved each other and they had forgiven each other.

...So why was this part of the trial?

"This is the third time I've been here," Alastor murmured beside his head and Vox glanced back at him in surprise. Alastor smiled wryly. "Time isn't linear here. I'm trapped in a loop of a few memories - not all of them my own but all of them involving Valentino. This is the final one before I restart the loop. I'm not sure what it is I'm supposed to do. If I touch the other version of myself, I become part of the scene, but I don't know why the trial is making me re-enact what happened all those decades ago."

Vox frowned. "That happened to me too a few scenes back. We were in an Overlord meeting - just after Val had released that damn film - and just as the other me was about to fry Valentino, I switched places with him and the scene changed."

Alastor frowned and shook his head. "I don't understand what we're meant to do here."

Vox peered through the window again, watching Alastor struggle with flashbacks before eventually lashing out at him. Then Valentino leapt on Alastor, restraining him, and a flicker of guilt started in Vox's chest. Valentino had been *protecting* him. How times had changed.

He frowned, looking away as a thought niggled at him. He remembered Valentino telling him once that he had only confronted Alastor that night because Roo had forced him to and the moth-demon hadn't realised she held no power outside the bookshop when no chain was involved.

Vox scowled as he watched himself get blinded. "The common thread is Valentino," he said slowly as he turned to Alastor. "Valentino and... fury?" He pursed his lips in frustration. "I... I don't understand. Are we trying to stop him from getting angry?"

Alastor shook his head. "We're supposed to reflect on ourselves. That's usually what the trials are about. To beat them, you have to overcome something. You must... improve on yourself somehow."

The house began to dissolve and Alastor and Vox shared an alarmed look.

"We'll likely meet back here again soon," Alastor said quickly. "Study Valentino in each scene. There must be something that can give us a clue about what we're aiming to achieve."

Vox frowned. "If it's a self-reflection, why do we both have a similar trial?"

Alastor ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. "I... I don't know. Perhaps because Valentino has been such a huge part of our lives?"

Vox's shoulders sagged. "Maybe? I mean sure, maybe I've had a more complicated relationship with him, but mostly he just pisses us both off."

He cut himself off and they shared a wide-eyed look. The house was almost gone.

“Is this about fucking *forgiveness*?” Vox hissed. “Are we supposed to forgive that fucking moth after everything he’s done?”

Alastor’s ears lowered. “...Surely not?” he whispered. “That can’t... He *dismembered* you!”

“You have got to be fucking kidding me?!” Vox snarled but his expression dropped when Alastor suddenly vanished and Vox was alone amidst the darkness once more.

He turned to the dollhouse-like bedroom, watching Valentino close in on Velvette once again.

Vox clenched his fists with a growl.

Alastor’s ears lowered as he restarted the loop. The first scene was the worst of them all.

And there was nothing he could do to change it. He had to stand by and *watch* Valentino abuse Vox.

As usual, it began with Vox showing up at Valentino’s door and apologising for attacking him and then Valentino apologised to Vox for calling Vox a *freak* and admitting that he had become jealous at seeing Vox with Alastor.

They collapsed onto the couch together and Vox lied about where he had been because he didn’t want to reveal that he had spent the last few days with Alastor, and then Vox brought up Valentino’s porn and how he wanted him to stop filming certain scenes, which inevitably led into an argument.

And things went downhill *very* quickly.

“What happened to the gentle, empathetic man I used to love?” Vox asked as he caressed Valentino’s cheek. “You’ve become everything you once hated.”

Valentino stiffened and suddenly snapped Vox’s antenna off. Vox cried out as Valentino hurled the rod across the room. “Fuck you! You turned me into this!”

Alastor flinched, averting his gaze as Valentino forced himself on Vox, shoving his tongue into his mouth, dosing him with venom despite Vox’s protests.

“You’ve never loved me. You’ve only ever had eyes for *him* - even after he abandoned you, even after he *broke* you... Nothing I do will ever be good enough.”

“Val, stop.”

“You’re still letting him manipulate you. After everything he’s done to you... You’re still obsessed with him. Still *infatuated* with him.”

“I’m not. Val, calm down. Let’s talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Valentino snapped and he manhandled Vox onto his hands and knees. “Like you said; I’m a useless whore. So why not do the only thing I’m good at?”

Alastor turned away, closing his eyes for the next part. He couldn’t watch this again. He couldn’t watch Vox *break* as Valentino degraded and insulted him and ignored his pleas to stop.

Alastor grimaced at every smack and whimper and when Vox cried ‘*red*’ and Valentino kept going, fury clawed at Alastor’s insides. He was tired of standing by and *watching*. He wanted to rip that moth off his lover. He wanted to beat him bloody. He wanted Valentino to *suffer*.

He turned, ears flattening as he watched Valentino thrust ruthlessly into Vox's mouth, the Television Demon's screen streaked with tears as Valentino bent his remaining antenna. "Look at me," Valentino demanded and Vox did.

Valentino shot him a disgusted sneer. "Some fucking Overlord you are. Weak, whiny, paranoid, desperate... Imagine if Alastor could see you now - imagine if he could see how hard you are. What would he say? He'd be nauseated. He'd think you perverted. He'd abandon you all over again."

"No the fuck he wouldn't!" Alastor snarled as he pounced on Valentino, teeth bared.

It was futile. He had tried to drag Vox away previously, but his fingers phased through the man and he was forced to watch the whole scene play out. Still, he could pretend to tear Valentino into tiny shreds and-

His perspective switched as his claws contacted Valentino's chest and, suddenly, he was looking down at a crying Vox, one hand bending his antenna and the other crushing his throat-

His stomach rolled and he scrambled away from Vox, tumbling off the couch. He looked down at himself, expecting to see violet skin and too many arms but he was still in his own body. He looked around frantically for Valentino, but the moth-demon was no longer in the room.

What the *fuck*?

He turned back to Vox and watched his lover crumple, head falling into his hands as he sobbed and hunched in on himself. Alastor's heart clenched and he perched next to Vox on the couch, draping an arm around his shoulders and idly noting that Vox was fully dressed.

Immediately, Vox flinched away from him. "Get the fuck off me!"

He broke down again, sobbing into his hands as he trembled.

“Vox, it’s alright. He’s gone. You’re safe,” Alastor said gently, surprised that he could interact with Vox at all. Was this the aim? Was he supposed to *save* Vox? To use his fury to *act*?

He grunted as Vox shoved him away and his back hit the arm of the couch.

“You’re a fucking psychopath!” Vox snarled. “I begged you to *stop!* To *listen*. But you-” Vox wrapped his arms around himself and looked away. “You didn’t. You-”

Vox choked out another sob and Alastor’s heart cracked. He took Vox’s hand gently. “Vox, darling, it’s me. Look at me. You’re safe. Valentino’s gone.”

Vox snatched his hand away. “I know it’s you, Alastor!” he snarled. “That’s the whole fucking problem!”

Alastor reared backwards in surprise as Vox stood, looking hysterical. “I want Val,” Vox whimpered. “*Shit*. I need Val.” He glanced at Alastor again, clenching his fists. “You’re a fucking monster. He said you’d hurt me. He warned me and I didn’t listen!”

He disappeared into the lights and Alastor was left staring in shock at the space he had occupied.

The scene melted away and Alastor was given no time to recover before he was plunged into the next one.

“Coffee? You got him a fucking coffee?”

Ah, now this one Alastor didn't understand. This one didn't end with Valentino and Vox fighting. It didn't end with Vox being humiliated or abused, it was merely a conversation.

"It was just a coffee, Val. Calm down."

Alastor approached the pair slowly, studying them both as the conversation continued. He touched Vox's shoulder and watched his fingers phase straight through him, like he was some sort of hologram.

"Have you forgotten what he did to you?"

"Have I forgotten that he beat me half to death on multiple occasions? No. Of course not." Vox frowned at his lap. "But it's recently come to light that things are a bit more... complicated than that."

"Complicated?" Valentino echoed incredulously. "You ended up in Purgatory because of him! You're chained because of him!"

"Except it wasn't his fault," said Vox quickly. "He was possessed."

Valentino scoffed in disgust. "Listen to yourself."

Vox crossed his arms defensively. "You know as well as I do how powerful Roo is."

"He's getting inside your head again. Manipulating you. This is exactly what he did last time and you keep falling for the same trick!"

Alastor glanced at Valentino curiously. He had never wanted to touch the moth-demon previously; too repulsed by him, but now he wondered...

He laid his fingers on Valentino's shoulder and his perspective once again shifted. Valentino vanished from the room, leaving only Alastor and Vox.

"Except I'm not," snapped Vox. "Because despite what you believe, Alastor, Val actually loves me and took care of me when you were trying to eviscerate me!"

Alastor frowned. They were back to this? Hadn't they already worked through all of Vox's complicated feelings of gratitude towards Valentino? Was he... Was he supposed to work through them with Vox again? This scene had happened shortly after Vox had offered him the olive branch at the Overlord meeting, so those confusing feelings towards Valentino would still be there, right?

But what was the point of working through them earlier? What would it prove?

"He doesn't," Alastor said slowly. "What he does to you isn't love. He wants to *possess* you. He wants to *own* you." It had taken a long time for Vox to sort through his feelings - one conversation would hardly resolve everything. What was this trial asking him to reflect on?

Vox ground his teeth together. "For fucks' sake, Alastor! How many times do I have to tell you that I *like* it? I know it freaks you out, but it's *fun*! Val takes good care of me. Stop getting so jealous and *grow up*."

Alastor blinked, irritation curling in his gut at the very *suggestion* of Valentino taking 'good care' of Vox. "He abuses you, Vox. He hurts you, humiliates you, degrades you... Valentino doesn't *love* you."

Vox rubbed the top of his screen in frustration. "It's just for fun," Vox sighed in exasperation. "He never goes further than I can take and we have a colour system. And he always takes care of me afterwards. He's right there when my mood drops and he always knows exactly what to do because he *loves* me." Vox scowled at Alastor. "And I love him."

Alastor's breath hitched. There was something steely and sincere in Vox's gaze and *oh*, something was *wrong*. Something was very wrong.

Was Vox being drugged by Valentino? Poisoned by his saliva to keep him coming back? How was Alastor supposed to save him?

“He’s manipulating you,” Alastor said. “Luring you in with moments of sweet praise so you’ll return to him. He sees you as nothing more than a machine.”

Vox’s antennae crackled as he clenched his fists. “He was there for me after you broke me. He put me back together piece by piece even when I was still *fixated* on you. He was patient and kind and it took me a *long* time to realise what I had, but now I’ve finally figured it out, I’ll be damned if I let you ruin it. You broke my heart once, Alastor. I won’t let you do it again.”

Alastor pulled a face and instinctively reached for Vox’s hand. Vox recoiled from him with wide eyes.

“I offered you a truce because of what you said in the radio tower, but maybe I shouldn’t have. Maybe I should have let our relationship stay dead. I thought there was a chance for us to be friends again. I *missed* you, but you aren’t worth losing Val over. I’ve *finally* moved on after everything you did to me and I won’t let you destroy my chance at happiness with someone who genuinely cares for me.”

Alastor was startled by the pain in his chest. He scowled in frustration. “You’re going to get hurt. He’s a psychopathic, manipulative *bastard* and-”

“Get out,” snapped Vox and Alastor straightened. “Go on, get out!” Vox hissed. “If you’re going to insult the man I love, then you can rant to yourself like the lonely, pathetic asshole you are.” He ushered Alastor towards the door and Alastor stumbled over his own feet in surprise.

Vox pushed him into the void outside and blocked the door frame with his body. “Get used to being second place,” Vox growled before he slammed the door in Alastor’s face.

Alastor brought a hand to his chest as he sucked in a sharp breath. It wasn't real, it was so far from the truth that it was laughable, but still... hearing Vox say he was second place to Valentino...

Damn, that stung. No, it was *painful*, like a pit had opened up in his stomach - one that stretched into his chest. He was grateful that in reality, Vox had always placed him first. He couldn't imagine Vox tossing him aside for that *moth*.

He heard voices behind him and his shoulders slumped a little as he turned and watched the next scene pan out across a theatre stage, with one of Valentino's porn sets as a backdrop. Alastor weaved his way through the rows and rows of seats and climbed the steps up to the stage.

"No spider whore today?" Vox growled and Valentino jumped and scowled at Vox.

"It's his day off. What do you want?"

Vox smiled bitterly and prowled towards Valentino. "I want you to fuck me."

Alastor wrinkled his nose. This was the start of Vox and Valentino's toxic relationship - the day Vox had asked Valentino to degrade and humiliate him. A day that haunted Vox even now. The day that Valentino had decided counted as blanket permission to *abuse* Vox whenever he liked.

With a sigh, Alastor touched Valentino's shoulder.

"Use me," Vox demanded. "I'm angry, you're angry, let's work our frustrations out together." He gripped Alastor's leg and *pulled*, and Alastor tumbled onto the bed. Vox stood and lingered at the foot of the bed and Alastor's eyes widened in alarm at his long boots and too many arms.

Wait, was he *actually* Valentino this time?

“Vox,” Alastor began but Vox suddenly parted his legs and crawled on top of him, and Alastor laid a hand against his chest. “Vox, stop.”

“Make me,” Vox purred as he shed his shirt.

“I don’t want to,” Alastor said with a frown as he pushed gently at Vox’s chest.

Vox flinched ever-so-slightly. “I’ll let you do whatever you want to me. I can take it. I’ve got replaceable parts.”

Alastor’s gaze softened, chest aching and he cupped Vox’s screen gently between two large hands. “You are worth more than this,” he whispered. “Stop, my dear. You’re only hurting yourself.”

Instead of the usual averted gaze, Vox looked angry. “Don’t pretend to care now.” He gripped Alastor by his lace shirt. “I want someone to choke me and hit me and stroke my cock at the same time. I want someone to call me a worthless whore as they come down my throat. I want someone to fuck me until I bleed. I want pleasure and pain and unfortunately, you’re the only one I actually trust to give me that without trying to *kill* me.”

Alastor stared, stunned. He had heard those lines from Vox before, but never directed at *him*. It felt as though the wind had been punched out of his lungs. He felt sick.

He brushed his fingers down the edge of Vox’s screen. “No, you don’t,” he whispered. He needed to wipe the anger and misery from Vox’s expression. “You want to be *loved*. You want to be taken care of. You want someone to tell you how beautiful you are. You want someone to kiss your scars and trace their fingers over your ports. You want someone to hold you tight and touch you *everywhere*. You want gentleness and devotion.”

He was expecting Vox to freeze and his expression to crumple. He was expecting Vox to slump and pull Alastor into a hug or bury his face into his chest like he usually did when he got overwhelmed.

He was not expecting a fist to the face.

“And what does a stupid *whore* know about any of that?” Vox snarled viciously as he pinned Alastor to the bed. “You’re worthless! You mean nothing, so stick to what you’re good at, Val. The *only* thing you’re good at.”

Alastor managed to flip their positions before he leapt off the bed and ran a hand through his hair, only to find antennae there instead.

That was... That was *agonising*. Hearing Vox growl something like that after he had said something so tender and vulnerable to the Television Demon... His chest ached.

When he next looked at Vox, the other demon looked a little... *off*. He was a fraction too tall and his claws were a bit too sharp and his vicious smile was slightly too wide.

“Vox, you don’t want pain. You’re... You’re *hurting*. What I put you- What *Alastor* put you through was cruel, but you don’t need to resort to this. Please don’t ask for this. You deserve so much better.”

“You’re right. I do deserve better than you,” Vox said as he twisted and grew and *distorted*, cables snaking around his limbs and his screen fading to a black background as his mouth disappeared, leaving only a pair of disturbing red eyes. His body cracked and bent until he was towering over Alastor. “But since I can’t have Alastor, I’ll have to settle for a consolation prize. So, strip, and while you’re at it, open your fucking mouth and give me some of that venom.”

A cable snaked around Alastor’s throat, choking him, burning him as it sparked, and Vox grabbed the other end and *yanked* until Alastor was dangling off the floor, writhing and flapping his wings as electricity danced over Vox’s enormous frame, which was now taking up the majority of the stage.

Vox lifted a claw and with a dark chuckle, pierced Alastor’s heart.

Alastor *howled*.

When he next opened his eyes, he was surrounded by darkness and back in his own body.

His chest heaved as he looked around.

The pieces clicked together slowly.

Valentino's perspective.

The scenes were all from Valentino's perspective.

The first two, he had switched places with Valentino, with Vox being in love with Valentino, and Alastor taking on Valentino's role of 'second best'. The third scene had him *starring* as Valentino with a visual representation of how the moth-demon saw Vox.

Because that day in Valentino's head, he had felt helpless against Vox. Vox still held his heart, still *owned* him in every way that mattered, but Vox had changed. Vox saw him as nothing more than a stupid whore, an object to be used. It didn't matter what Valentino said or did or how much he loved Vox, he would always be second place when compared to Alastor. Vox would *never* want him.

So he might as well do what Vox wanted, because what *he* wanted didn't matter.

Alastor wasn't looking forward to the next scene.

Because the next scene took place in Vox's office, right after Vox returned from Purgatory. Initially, Alastor had been angry with Valentino for how things had ended between him and Vox, angry at Valentino for making Vox feel like a *freak* right after the torture he had endured

during Purgatory, but now... now he was a little nervous about what would happen when he touched Valentino.

Vox's office floated ahead of him, suspended by nothing, and Alastor walked towards it, slipping inside as he watched Valentino inspect Vox's trinkets and nicknacks as though... as though he missed him.

As Valentino picked up one of Vox's shark-shaped pens with a small, fond smile, a drained-looking Vox trudged into the room.

"Vox. You're back."

"Thanks for noticing. What are you doing in my office?" The words were clipped and cool.

"I... I missed you. Are you... alright?" Valentino asked tentatively.

"Peachy."

Alastor watched the exchange for a little while, noting for the first time that Valentino seemed to be genuinely concerned for Vox, whilst Vox looked tired and miserable; his replies prickly and cold and littered with little jabs at Valentino's insecurities.

And then came the confession - the one that had surprised Alastor the first time. It felt... genuine. He wasn't accustomed to hearing sincerity from Valentino's lips.

"I confronted Alastor because she told me to threaten him. I didn't want to, I swear! And I only came to you that night because she told me where to find you - she told me what Alastor had done. She asked me to lie to you to keep you two apart, said she'd kill me if I didn't and I- I was so afraid because she'd already tortured me once and I didn't want to face that again, but following her orders isn't worth putting you through so much pain, and I'm sorry, Vox. I'm so fucking sorry."

He looked... afraid. Upset. Alastor's ears lowered. He hadn't really paid attention to Valentino's expressions previously because he had been far too angry at the moth-demon to care how *he* felt. But now he was starting to realise that might be the whole point.

His *fury* at Valentino.

That was what he was being tested on.

The problem was trying to overcome fury at the man who had abused and degraded Vox. The man who had dismembered him and treated him as little more than a robot. The man who had broken Vox in too many ways to count, who had threatened Alastor and beaten Velvette and disrespected Rosie and *raped* Angel and-

Alastor growled to himself, fists clenching before he forced himself to calm down and focus on the conversation.

"As long as you didn't make a deal with her, she has no power outside the bookshop."

Valentino froze. "What?"

Vox searched his face for a moment before narrowing his eyes. "I could have told you that if you'd been truthful with me from the start."

"I thought she would kill me!" Valentino hissed before his chest heaved and he pressed his back against the door. "I didn't need to do any of that," he whispered. "I should never have lied to you about Alastor. I shouldn't have threatened him." He gripped his own arms tighter. "He invited me inside," he whimpered. "He was trying to be *kind* to me and I... I..."

Alastor tilted his head. Valentino sounded genuinely distressed. He *looked* distressed.

...Distressed at hurting *Alastor*.

His heart sank.

Perhaps Valentino hadn't always been the villain he was now. Perhaps circumstance had shaped him.

"I wouldn't worry," Vox said darkly. "He deserved everything you did to him."

Valentino baulked. "You love him. How can you say that? I saw how desperate you were to save him." Valentino shook his head angrily. "I should have helped you. I knew he was on her chain. I knew what she was capable of. I... I should have helped you both, but I was a coward."

Alastor's ears flattened against his skull as his shoulders sagged.

Valentino had also accepted that Vox loved Alastor rather than him. He had admitted to his cowardice. This Valentino wasn't the one Alastor had grown so accustomed to loathing.

Vox raked his gaze slowly over Valentino's form and Valentino shifted uncomfortably.

"I shouldn't have tried to drive you two apart. And I certainly shouldn't have run from you when you trusted me to take care of you," Valentino said quietly. "I really am sorry, Vox. I wasn't expecting you to look like that, but I shouldn't have made you feel like shit. I should have stayed. I should have reassured you."

A sincere apology. Valentino had once given those too.

He really had loved Vox, hadn't he?

Alastor grimaced at the following exchange over his supposed ‘betrayal’, at how he had tricked Vox and dumped him at Roo’s mercy. Valentino was furious, *protective*. Alastor hadn’t really noticed it before.

With a sigh, Alastor stepped behind Valentino and touched his wing.

He learned two things: one, he was in Valentino’s body, two, he had no control over said body.

When he next looked at Vox, anxiety weaved through his chest.

Vox’s screen was once again mouthless with a dark background and two crudely-etched red eyes. His claws were long and sharp and cables slithered around his arms and waist, crackling and sparking like live snakes. In one hand he held... a beating heart? The tips of his claws bit gently into the pulsing muscle and rivulets of blood dripped down the organ.

There was another cable attached to Vox’s pinkie finger and this one curled around Valentino’s neck.

Alastor’s stomach dropped.

“I understand what he really thinks of me now,” said Vox as sparks danced between his antennae. “And I understand what you think of me too.”

His body grew an inch taller.

“Vox-”

Vox held a hand up. “I get it. It’s okay, Val. You’re allowed to have opinions. My body’s a freak show, I know. I’ve come to accept that people will always be repulsed by it.”

“Vox-”

“But that doesn’t mean I can’t make you feel good,” purred Vox. “That doesn’t mean you can’t use me to fulfil some of your... wilder fantasies.” He stood and stalked around the desk and as he did so, his body cracked and twisted, limbs elongating, electricity flashing faster and brighter across his skin.

“I can turn off my pain receptors. You can be as rough as you like. You can hurt me as much as you want. And having a biomechanical system means I have replaceable parts. You can rip out entire pieces of me and I’ll have a back-up. I might be a monster, more machine than person, but that only means you can do *more* with me.”

Vox halted in front of him and slid a hand suggestively up his chest, but the cable around his neck tightened and his claws bit deeper into the heart in his palm and Alastor’s chest *hurt*.

“Why would I want to hurt you?” Alastor heard himself whisper in Valentino’s voice. “That is the *last* thing I want to do to you.”

Vox’s expression hardened. “Could have fooled me.” And then Vox gripped his jaw painfully tight and dragged him into a deep, demanding kiss.

His lips *burned* from Vox’s electricity and Vox’s claws tore deeper into the heart in his palm as more cables snaked around Valentino’s neck, burning him, *choking* him, and yet it was still everything Alastor wanted and he never wanted it to stop, but the cables were tightening around his throat and more were slithering up his legs and restraining his arms, burning his skin, *hurting* him-

He pushed Vox away and Vox growled in frustration as the cables receded, but Vox stood taller than Valentino now, not in his demonic form, but as something cruel and mechanical and unfeeling.

“What is wrong with you?”

Vox flinched before glowering at the moth-demon. “This is what you wanted, isn’t it? For me to want you? For me to choose you over Alastor?” He threw his arms out. “Well, here I am! Do you want me to get on my knees? Do you want me to beg to suck your cock?” He dropped to his knees and Valentino watched on before sinking in front of Vox and cupping his face between both hands.

Vox glowered at him, fury and hurt and bitterness swirling behind his furious digital eyes.

“What did she do to you?” Valentino asked softly.

Vox’s expression broke for a second before he shoved at Valentino’s chest. “Get off me,” he bit out before standing and straightening out his coat. “I thought this was your thing? Fucking people without hesitation? It’s what you do, isn’t it?”

The cables struck Valentino’s arms and wings as metal spires rose from Vox’s shoulders and spine like armour.

Valentino recoiled. “Is that all you see me as? A whore?”

Vox shrugged. “I guess. Do you have any other talents?”

Alastor’s chest tightened and for the first time he felt... pity for Valentino. Despite Vox’s cruelty, despite how he knew Vox loved Alastor and not him, despite how Vox was *hurting* him... Valentino was still trying to help Vox.

As the scene progressed, Vox continued to slowly shift and change into something unrecognisable.

“Come here, Valentino,” he purred, eyes swirling hypnotically as thicker cables wound around Valentino’s body, dragging him closer, forcing his legs to move until he was sitting in

Vox's lap, kissing him because Vox was forcing him to.

"See, I can make people do whatever I want," he whispered, lips brushing Valentino's with every syllable as the moth-demon tensed on his lap. "The problem with trusting people is that they *lie*. Like you lied. Like Alastor lied. But if I'm controlling them, then they can't lie, can they?"

He pulled back and Alastor was looking at something truly monstrous. This wasn't Vox. Even the voice had started to *pop* and echo, like something... robotic. "And why stop there? With the help of television, I can control *thousands* of people. I could become the most powerful Overlord in the Pride Ring."

Valentino gripped Vox's shoulders. "This isn't you," he whispered and Alastor could *feel* his distress.

Vox pushed Valentino against the desk harshly, trapping him against it. "I've learned from my mistakes," he growled. "Choose whether you want to stay by my side or fight against me."

Valentino scowled at him. "Even without the threat, you know I will always choose to stay by your side. You know how I feel about you, amorcito."

Vox released him. "Good choice. Now, if you don't want to fuck me, get out. I've got work to do."

Valentino flinched before carefully reaching out to cup the side of Vox's head, despite the charge that would make his fingers blister and bleed, despite the copper wires that scraped along Valentino's arms, digging trenches into his skin. Vox stiffened.

"I'm sorry, Vox. I never meant for you to feel like this," Valentino whispered. "I never meant to hurt you like this." He brushed his thumb tenderly over Vox's cheek, even though he received a nasty shock for it. "Tell me how to fix it."

Vox glared at him but Alastor noticed there was something vulnerable behind his red, distorted eyes. “I don’t need your pity.”

Valentino carefully slid into Vox's lap once more and smoothed his lower pair of hands over Vox’s sides as his free upper hand rubbed the knots out of Vox’s shoulder.

“I don’t pity you,” Valentino breathed. “You’re hurting. I want to fix it.”

Finally, finally, Vox leaned into Valentino’s touch, eyes sliding shut.

And the scene ended, leaving Alastor in darkness.

His chest heaved and he put a hand to his throat as his pulse raced and his heart clenched and his stomach rolled.

The scene hadn’t ended there last time. When he had been spectating outside of Valentino’s body, he had witnessed them touching each other and failing. He had been pleased when Vox had hypnotised Valentino into leaving after he had grimaced at Vox’s body. Valentino didn’t deserve the *privilege* of touching Vox.

But now Alastor realised it wasn’t so simple. Valentino *had* hurt Vox, but he’d tried to apologise for it and Vox had repaid him by lashing out - because Vox was *also* hurting from Purgatory. Purgatory had changed him, hardened him, made him colder, distorted his views of the world and his relationships, *manipulated* him, and Valentino had suffered for it.

But Valentino had still *tried*. He’d tried, knowing that he would get hurt, knowing that Vox loved Alastor over him, knowing that Vox could so easily break him because not only was Vox *physically* more powerful, he also held Valentino’s heart in the palm of his hand. Because Vox had Valentino wrapped around his little finger.

Because Valentino *truly* loved Vox and had once wanted what was best for him, even if it meant that he would get hurt in the process.

Alastor frowned at his own hands.

That... wasn't fair.

Because that meant Valentino had *never* had a chance at happiness. Even when he did the right thing, it would always come back to bite him.

Alastor could be angry at Valentino for what he had done to Vox, but the truth was that he hadn't always been so vile. His heart had been in the right place once. He had *tried* to take care of Vox when Alastor had abandoned him, but years of fighting and miscommunication and carelessness had worn him down and shaped him into the monster he was today.

And Vox and Alastor had caused the majority of his pain. They had been the igniting spark for his transformation, as well as the fuel.

Shit.

If the three of them had stopped fighting and lashing out at each other long enough to *listen* to one another... perhaps they wouldn't have been forced to suffer so much pain. Perhaps Valentino wouldn't have become the wicked monster he now was. Perhaps Alastor wouldn't have faced seven years of Purgatory and Vox wouldn't have been chained by Roo and-

Alastor closed his eyes. No use dwelling on *what-ifs*.

He had trials to beat and a lover to reunite with.

A house appeared in front of him. *His* house.

He startled when arms wrapped around him from behind, a face pressing into his hair. Alastor relaxed and placed his hands over Vox's.

"I think I know what we're supposed to do here," Vox whispered and he sounded... subdued.

"So do I," murmured Alastor and Vox squeezed him gently before releasing him and slotting their hands together.

Alastor smiled weakly at him. Vox looked *exhausted*. He lifted a hand to stroke one of Vox's antennae and Vox leaned into his touch desperately before removing his hand and kissing his knuckles.

They slipped into the house together.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: The trials will be HEAVY chapters dealing with lots of sensitive themes, so be warned. There is a brief mention of suicide at the beginning of this one and we revisit the non-con/rape scene between Vox/Val in the later section.

I have been looking forward to writing this arc for ages so you'd better believe they're going to be looong chapters ;) We see Vox's Fury trial in the next part :)

UPDATE: There is now fanart for this chapter by the talented *InkedGravity*
<https://bsky.app/profile/inkedgravity.bsky.social/post/3l7kewcxwvv2s>

Chapter 54: Fury - Pt. II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He couldn't do it.

He couldn't forgive Valentino.

He'd been through each scene four times now and he was starting his fifth round. He hadn't seen Alastor since that first round.

How could he forgive Valentino after everything that moth had done?

He scrubbed a hand down his screen. He was never getting out of here.

The loop restarted and Vox looked up tiredly at the dollhouse-like room. He watched Valentino advance on Velvette, watched Velvette retreat.

"You weren't supposed to find out."

He'd attacked Valentino, argued with him, tried saving both Velvette and Alastor. Nothing worked. He always returned to the start of the loop.

"You're a fucking psychopath! You've *dismembered* him!"

He'd stepped into his own body, tried to alter scenes, he'd even tried telling Valentino to his face that he forgave him - through gritted teeth and with clenched fists, but *still*.

“He isn’t *dead*. I’m going to put him back together!”

Vox sighed and slid quietly into the room, obscured from Valentino and Velvette’s view by the wardrobe. He propped himself against the side of the wardrobe and closed his eyes, listening to their voices.

“I just... need more time to make him perfect. And then we’ll be happy. I *know* we can be happy.”

“We won’t,” Vox muttered. “You know damn well we won’t.”

Valentino and Velvette startled, whirling around to face the wardrobe. They looked horrified. Vox watched their reflections through one of Valentino’s oversized mirrors.

“...Vox?” breathed Velvette. “How are you... How are you *talking*?”

Vox sighed quietly. He didn’t want to move - and what did it matter if he stayed hidden? This Velvette and Valentino weren’t real.

“What? You think because my head’s not attached to my body, my tongue has stopped working? It’ll take more than a severed head to shut me up,” Vox scoffed. He might as well amuse himself. He wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon and who knew when he’d next see Alastor? Maybe never.

“You... shouldn’t be able to speak,” Valentino whispered, staring at the wardrobe in shock. “You... You shouldn’t be able to *hear* us. I shut you down. I made sure to shut you down. I made sure you couldn’t feel anything or see anything or hear anything.”

“Well, you did a piss poor job at it,” Vox drawled.

Through the mirror, he watched Valentino's antennae droop. "No... No, I made sure. I made sure you wouldn't feel it. I made sure you wouldn't *know*..."

"You made sure I wouldn't fight back when you chopped me into pieces and shoved me in your closet. Oh, how *considerate*," Vox scoffed.

Valentino shook his head desperately. "No! I made sure you wouldn't *feel* it! I... I didn't want you to be scared. I didn't want you to be in pain, so I shut you down." His eyes widened. "Oh, fuck. Could you feel it? Were you awake for all of it? *Mierda!* Vox, I never meant for you to suffer through that..."

Vox frowned, tilting his head slightly. "Why do you care? Thought I was just a machine to you?"

"You can still feel pain," Valentino said. "You feel emotions. You may be a machine, but you have a human heart."

Vox's breath hitched, eyes blowing wide. He struggled for words for a moment.

"...How much did you feel?" Valentino asked quietly.

Vox drew his knees to his chest. "All of it," he lied. "I felt all of it."

Valentino fell silent as Velvette gasped softly.

"Amorcito, I'm *sorry*," Valentino said. "I thought-"

Fury washed over Vox like a tidal wave. "No, fuck you! You don't get to be *sorry* for this! Look what you've done to me! You chopped me into pieces like I'm your *toy*! I'm not your fucking property, Valentino! You put a fucking *explosive* in my brain!"

Again, Velvette made a sound of alarm as Valentino tried to protest.

“Because you wouldn’t *listen*, ” Valentino insisted. “I just... needed a way to make you understand. I get it now. You want tenderness and gentleness and I can give you that, Voxy. But you won’t give me a chance now you’ve got Alastor so I... I needed to convince you to give me a chance.”

“So you threatened to blow me to pieces?”

“I don’t even know how to use it!” Valentino snapped. “You were never in any *real* danger! I just needed you and Alastor to *think* you were, so I-” Valentino clamped his mouth shut and Vox fell silent for the second time.

“You... Voxy, I *love* you. *Why* would I try to kill you?”

Vox tensed, staring at the mirror with wide eyes. “...This isn’t *love*, Val. This is obsession. You *dismembered* me.”

“I *dismantled* you,” Valentino said desperately. “And you weren’t supposed to feel it. I was going to put you back together! I needed you to *listen*!”

Listen.

Vox blinked and frowned and leaned back against the wardrobe. “I... I’m listening.”

Valentino’s antennae drooped and he glanced briefly at the bruised Velvette and his eyes filled with... guilt. He ran a hand through his good antenna.

“I always did everything you wanted. I stayed by your side when Alastor abandoned you, when he *hurt* you. I put you back together. I *always* put you back together. I... I don’t understand why you can toss me aside so easily. I don’t understand why after fifty *years* of being with me, you can suddenly throw me away like garbage and latch straight onto Alastor.”

An unexpected ache blossomed in Vox’s chest. “Because he *adores* me, Val. Because he doesn’t feel nauseous just looking at me. Because he supports me and makes me feel *worthy*. He trusts me implicitly and he’s loyal and when I’m broken, he doesn’t just put me back together, he builds me *stronger*.”

“But I can do those things too,” Valentino said quietly. “And I can’t help my body’s reaction to you, but we could find a way to work around it. I don’t understand why I’m not good enough for you.”

Vox licked his lips as his chest filled with a strange sort of emptiness. “You treat me like a machine, Val. You degrade and humiliate me and make me feel like I’m less than a person.”

Valentino frowned. “You asked me to do that. And you *are* a machine, Vox. You have circuitry and wires and buttons.” His shoulders slumped. “But I love you anyway. I’ve always loved you. Even when you treat me like shit. Even though I know I’ll always be second place to Alastor.”

Vox fell quiet, unable to gather the correct words as Valentino edged a little closer to the wardrobe.

“And even though you’re a machine, I *know* you have emotions. I know you can love and hate and feel happy or miserable. I *know* you feel pain and pleasure, even if it isn’t in the conventional way. But you’re so damn complicated and you’re far cleverer than I’ll ever be and you have so many *issues* and I... I don’t know where to start. I don’t know how to get close, because you keep pushing me away and you think I’m *stupid* and you think I’m a worthless *whore* and I don’t know how to make you see me as *more* than that.”

Vox’s heart sank. “...Why didn’t you tell me any of this sooner? Why wait fifty *years*?” He felt... sick. Valentino didn’t see him as a cold, emotionless robot. He saw Vox as a huge, complicated machine with too many intricate parts - a machine that he didn’t understand. He

knew Vox felt things, but he didn't understand how and he was *desperate* to learn, but Vox had burned the manual.

"I *tried*," Valentino said miserably. "You wouldn't listen. I wanted to give you everything. I knew you were hurting after Alastor abandoned you. I wanted to make you feel better. I wanted to help you, but it became obvious that you don't *work* the way everyone else does. You don't feel things the way people do and no matter what I did, you weren't really interested in me. You only wanted Alastor. I didn't know what button to press to change that."

Vox stared at the mirror, at Valentino's distressed and miserable expression, and he wrapped his arms around his legs and felt... numb.

"It had nothing to do with feeling things *differently*. I was *grieving*, Val. Mourning the death of someone I'd lost. Alastor was my best friend. I trusted him with every fibre of my being; I felt *safe* with him. He was a huge part of my life and suddenly, he attacked me and betrayed me and I felt like a piece of myself had *died*. I lost so much when I lost Alastor. It was worse than him dying because at least if he had died, I would have known that he never meant to leave me, but he *chose* to abandon me. He *chose* to betray me. It had nothing to do with you - the reason I couldn't love you was because I had nothing left to *give*."

A tear rolled down his screen and he watched it land on his stomach in surprise.

"...You forgave Alastor," Valentino said. "I don't understand why you'd do that after everything he did. After he made you feel like that."

Vox laughed weakly. "Because I love him. Because he loves me. Because we were miserable without each other."

Valentino hesitated. "Why can't you forgive me?"

Vox fell silent, considering the question carefully. "...Because you haven't earned it."

“I did everything you asked. I helped you when you were at your lowest,” Valentino protested. “I was *there* for you.”

“But you didn’t *listen*,” Vox said slowly. “What I asked for wasn’t really what I wanted. You were so desperate to get me to love you, that you didn’t pay attention to what I needed. You helped me after Alastor left because Roo told you to. And maybe there was a time where you helped me because you genuinely cared, but eventually that twisted into helping me because you wanted something out of it - because you wanted me to love you.”

Valentino looked *lost*.

“Alastor doesn’t blindly give me what I ask for,” Vox said gently. “He gives me what I *need*. He helps me because he hates seeing me upset, not because he expects something out of it. He doesn’t rush. He doesn’t see me as an untouchable, complicated machine - he sees me as a man who has been hurt by his past. He accepts that he broke me and he wants to make up for it. There are no ‘buts’, no protests that I hurt him too - even if I did. He takes responsibility for his choices and apologises for them, and in doing so, I *trust* him. I can be vulnerable around him and know there aren’t any ulterior motives when he comforts and reassures me.”

Vox smiled, small and tired. “And that’s why it’s so easy to forgive him. Because he loves me unconditionally and if it meant giving me up to you or someone else, he’d let me go. Because he wants me to be happy, even if it makes him miserable.”

Valentino swallowed. “I... I don’t...” He shook his head. “I don’t understand. How can he love you if he’s willing to give you up? He should fight for you. He should do everything he can to keep you. *That’s* what love is! Being willing to *change* for the person you love. Proving that you’ll do *anything* to keep them in your life.”

Vox blinked, glancing briefly at the wardrobe behind him and his stomach dropped.

In his human life, Valentino had been in an abusive relationship. His perception of *love* was skewed. Why had Vox never realised that before?

His eyes widened. "...You think love is *supposed* to hurt." His shoulders slumped. "And I proved you *right*. I... I should have helped you."

Suddenly, the scene faded away, leaving Vox surrounded by darkness. He looked around, startled, before he frowned at himself. He felt *weary*.

"Vox."

"Val."

He looked up and watched the Overlord meeting play out. With a sigh, he stood and shuffled into the room. He listened to Rosie argue with Valentino, watched Valentino's temper rise, and he came to stand behind the other version of himself as past him pointedly tangled his fingers with Alastor's.

Valentino sprung to his feet, wings spread wide. "The only reason that *bastard* is paying you attention is because he's a fucking coward who needs protection now that everyone knows he's *rapeable!*"

As the other version of him launched out of the chair, Vox touched his shoulder.

He steadied himself against the edge of the table, placing his hands flat against its surface as he frowned at Valentino.

"You need to let me go," Vox said gently.

Valentino bared his teeth. "*What?*"

Vox licked his lips and shook his head, ignoring the other Overlords' eyes on him. "It won't work; you trying to humiliate Alastor. You're trying to make me believe he's weak. You're

trying to knock him off the pedestal you think I've put him on, but it won't work. There's no pedestal and I won't toss him away and suddenly choose you."

Valentino straightened, looking wounded. Then he let out a low growl. "Why the fuck not? Why the fuck are you so *obsessed* with him?"

Vox returned to his seat and took Alastor's hand again. It wasn't the real Alastor but he would take what he could get. Alastor looked at him curiously as Valentino gritted his teeth.

"I love him," Vox said softly and both Alastor and Rosie's breaths hitched. Vox restrained an amused smile before he sobered. "I'm sorry, Val. But you need to stop this - you're only hurting yourself."

Valentino blinked and straightened before he clenched his fists and *flew* across the table.

Vox gasped as Valentino rammed him against the wall and pinned him against it by the throat.

Immediately, Alastor was on his feet, gripping one of Valentino's flared wings and hurling him against the table with a snarl. Valentino turned his attention to Alastor instead and lunged at him, and Vox stiffened as the two began to fight.

Alastor would kill him before he got a chance to figure out how to complete the scene.

"Stop!" Vox shouted and Alastor hesitated, but Valentino clawed at his face and the Radio Demon clenched his teeth and summoned his shadows.

Before the shadows could strike, Vox stepped between both men and laid a hand against Alastor's chest as he put his back to Valentino. He gazed pleadingly at Alastor and even this past version of him didn't need words to understand Vox. With an unhappy scowl, Alastor recalled his shadows and lowered his arms.

Vox smiled gratefully before turning to a bruised Valentino.

“Stop,” Vox said again, softly. “Please, stop.”

Valentino said nothing, merely frowned at Vox as he panted.

“Stop competing with him,” Vox murmured.

“Stop *choosing* him,” Valentino growled. “He’s a fucking *coward*! He can’t give you what you want! He’s fucking *broken*!”

Vox shook his head slowly. “He’s been through a lot. Like you.”

Valentino froze and Vox looked at him sadly. “You’re hurting.”

Valentino bristled. “I’m fine. He’s the one who-”

“You feel like I’ve betrayed you.”

Valentino snapped his mouth shut and Vox smiled weakly and held his hands out. “I wasn’t listening before. I’m listening now. Tell me why you’re jealous of him.”

“...I’m not... I’ve nothing to be *jealous* of. Why would I be jealous of a *bitch* who got fucked half to death by three guys?”

Alastor flinched and Vox instinctively reached behind him, seeking out Alastor’s hand to comfort him.

“No, you were merely abused by a man you thought loved you. He shared your body with his friends and forced you to perform for them and he dragged you into a world of sex and drugs against your will. He forced you to be a pimp, ruined your life, made you terrified to say *no* and then, after all that, he used you as a scapegoat and left you to *burn* in prison, alone and afraid.” Vox held Valentino’s stunned gaze. “But you’re *fine*, right?”

Valentino swallowed and retreated a step before he glanced at the other Overlords. “That’s not... That isn’t true. He... He’s lying.”

“Who the fuck cares what they think?” Vox growled as he touched Valentino’s arm, earning an instinctive flinch. *Oh*, Vox had really done a number on this man... “They don’t fucking matter. Val, look at me.”

Valentino obeyed, looking almost afraid beneath the angry mask.

“I should have *asked*,” Vox said softly, chest aching. “All those years of you staying by my side, comforting me the only way you know how, and I never thought to ask how *you* were.”

Valentino blinked, shrinking back from Vox slightly.

“I was so wrapped up in my own insecurities, so hurt by some of the things you said and did to me, that I never thought to ask *why* you did those things. I’m sorry, Val.”

Valentino stared at him for a long moment before his expression crumpled for a fraction of a second and then, he stormed out of the meeting room.

The room faded away and Vox rubbed at his arm as guilt washed over him.

He could have been kinder to Valentino. More patient. More understanding.

Valentino needed a friend, not a lover. Why hadn’t Vox seen that before?

He turned to his office and watched Alastor hug the past version of himself from behind. He watched them converse for a moment, watched them *support* each other, and he watched as Valentino barged into the room, expression filled with betrayal and anger.

“The fuck is this? Are you *fucking* this piece of shit now?”

He watched himself defend Alastor, immediately insulting Valentino and growing furious with him, preparing himself for a fight. Vox watched distress flood Valentino’s face openly, even as he masked his hurt with biting comments directed at Alastor.

“Fuck you,” Vox’s past self snarled, jabbing a claw in Valentino’s direction. “No, really. *Fuck you*, Valentino. Because you *know*. You know what he’s been through because she told you. And you still have the audacity to make shitty comments like that.” Electricity crackled over his fingers. “*Fuck you.*”

Valentino blinked before he bared his teeth at Vox and the jealousy and grief and betrayal were dancing clearly in his eyes, yet Vox’s past self couldn’t see it. “Why do you care? He broke you. He left you bleeding in the middle of the street. He’s fought you more times than I can count. He doesn’t give a damn about you, Vox. He’s *using* you. That’s what he does.”

Vox’s past self smiled viciously. “And how many times have you broken me, Val? How many times have you cracked my screen or made me bleed or left me with so many bruises at night that I can barely walk the next morning? How many times have you called me ‘disgusting’ or ‘freak’ or ‘pathetic’?”

“You are fucking pathetic,” Valentino hissed throwing a hand up at Alastor. “You’re *obsessed* with him. You’re letting your enemy literally fuck you up the ass! Are you that *desperate* for attention? That desperate for someone to touch you?”

His hurt seemed so obvious now - the way he insulted Alastor but never dared to attack either of them. He was lashing out like a child who was uncertain how to process his own thoughts and feelings. No one ever listened to him, no one ever comforted him, so he hurt others before they could hurt him.

“If he sees the shit under your shirt, he’ll never touch you again. You’re a fucking freak. He’ll never want you, Vox.”

The words stung less because Alastor *did* want him and Alastor *had* worshipped his body, but Vox pulled a face because Valentino was so *desperate* to have the support and comfort that Vox and Alastor shared and, *damn it*, why hadn’t Vox recognised any of this sooner? If he had just stopped being so *angry* at Valentino for a few minutes-

Vox blinked as the epiphany struck him.

This trial wasn’t about *forgiving* Valentino.

It was about recognising how he had contributed to the moth-demon’s slow spiral into depravity and desperation. It was about seeing what he could have done differently to *help* Valentino, to stop him from becoming the monster he had turned into.

All those times he had lashed out at Alastor and Velvette... There were *reasons* behind them; a series of events that led Valentino straying away from every single value he’d initially possessed.

Valentino’s old self would have been horrified by what he had become.

And Vox had been so wrapped up in his own problems and grief and fury that he had *let* Valentino saunter off that ledge - perhaps even pushed him.

He jumped when Alastor’s shadows pinned Valentino against the wall and as he spoke, Vox raced across the room and slipped into his own body.

“I hope they fucked you bloody.”

Alastor retreated with wide eyes, shadows dissolving, and instead of attacking Valentino, Vox turned to Alastor and slipped an arm around his waist as he cupped his cheek.

“You’re safe,” Vox whispered and Alastor looked at him with a strained smile, ears flat and gaze flickering with fear.

Vox remembered that their touches had been limited at this point and he quickly dropped his hand from Alastor’s face.

“Sorry,” he whispered, but he kept his arm around Alastor’s waist and Alastor started to relax.

Vox glanced at Valentino, watching the confusing mix of fury and anguish and envy play across his expression.

“I should have treated you better,” Vox said gently, shocking both Valentino and Alastor. “You deserve support and reassurance the same as Alastor does, but I never gave it to you. I made you face it all alone.”

Valentino bared his teeth and clenched his fists. “I don’t need your pity.”

“No, you needed a friend. You needed someone you could trust. Someone you could be vulnerable around, like I can around Alastor. You tried to tell me. You tried to show me. But every time you opened up to me, every time you *asked* for help, I ignored you. I made you figure it out yourself.”

Valentino reared backwards as Velvette raced into the room, looking worried.

“It’s alright, we’re just talking,” Vox murmured.

Valentino's gaze seemed suspiciously glassy. "You're supposed to be *mine*. Why do you keep falling into *his* arms?"

"Because I love him," Vox said, and he was starting to understand, now. He could have loved Alastor and still supported Valentino all those years ago. It wasn't a matter of *choosing* one over the other.

"You're supposed to love *me*," Valentino hissed. "I took care of you for fifty years! I stood by your side against him."

"And I shouldn't have made you do that," Vox said quietly as he squeezed Alastor's waist. "I shouldn't have pitted you against each other. I should have helped to resolve the tension between you both, not created more."

"Vox, he abuses you, manipulates you," Alastor whispered and Vox shook his head.

"And look at what I've done to him. This isn't the Valentino we knew all those years ago. I've broken him." Alastor had helped too, but Vox should have bridged the gap between them. He should have helped them to understand one another.

"I'm not *broken*," seethed Valentino.

Vox frowned at him. "You are. We all are. We could have helped each other to heal but we didn't. I pushed you away, isolated you, made you feel worthless and unwanted."

"He cheated on you," Alastor pointed out.

"I know," Vox sighed. "And that was wrong of him. There are plenty of things he chose to do that weren't my fault - things that hurt me and humiliated me. But I did plenty of things to him as well. Things I shouldn't have. We've both been pretty shitty to each other. He was abused by the man he loved and he treats me the same way because he doesn't know any

different. He doesn't know how to say 'no' or ask for help. He thinks love is supposed to be painful."

"I do *not*," Valentino growled. "I'm not as stupid as you think I am! I know how to say *no* and I know how to ask for help! I'm not a child!"

"Then tell me what you need right now," Vox said carefully.

"I *need* you to kick the Radio Demon out of the tower you built to keep him away, and I *need* you to pay attention to *me*! Your fucking *lover*!"

Vox pressed his lips together. "Why does it bother you so much to see me with him? You've seen me fuck other people and you didn't care, so why does it bother you when I'm merely talking to Alastor?"

"I did care!" Valentino snapped and Vox stilled in surprise.

"Of course I fucking cared!" Valentino continued viciously. "But I'd slept with so many whores because you were so *cold* to me. I could see it was hurting you, yet I didn't fucking *stop* because I just needed to *pretend* that someone wanted me, and it took a long time for you to start sleeping around and I could see you were miserable and I hated watching you with other people, but I couldn't ask you to stop because *I did it first*! I betrayed you and I couldn't tell you that watching you fuck other people bothered me, because it would make me a fucking hypocrite!"

Vox's eyes were wide and round as Valentino averted his gaze.

"Val," he whispered, but the scene dissolved before he could finish his sentence and Vox was left feeling hollow and shaken.

He wrapped his arms around himself and wished Alastor was beside him.

He cast his gaze to the television and the VCR and he trudged over to it slowly, pushing the video into the slot, barely watching the fight between Valentino and Alastor play out in the Entertainment District.

The door behind the television opened.

Vox dragged himself to his feet and forced himself to watch yet another argument between him and Valentino.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I just... I saw him and I got angry.”

“So you challenged him? You know how powerful he is! I wouldn’t have been able to beat him if I hadn’t caught him off-guard.”

“If it wasn’t for him, you’d be free.”

“He could have killed you. You’d have lost everything; your power, your Overlord status... It might take you weeks to regenerate after he’s finished with you.”

“Should have shot him in the head.”

“You don’t challenge him again, you hear me? You stay away from him.”

Vox watched on unhappily. Valentino had been trying to *protect* him. He was angry at Alastor *on behalf* of Vox. Valentino had tried so hard to love him...

Valentino blinked in surprise before baring his teeth at the younger Vox and shoving at him.

“I’m trying to protect you,” Vox’s past self grumbled.

“You’re trying to protect *him*.”

Vox leapt out of the way as Valentino slammed the door and he watched the moth-demon march into the darkness, his glowing form flickering the further he strayed.

Vox raced after him and put a hand on his shoulder and he was surprised when Valentino turned around with a snarl.

The darkness dissolved, revealing a corridor from V-Tower and Vox wondered if this was what would have happened had he chased after Valentino that afternoon.

“Wait,” Vox said and Valentino glowered at him, arms crossed. “You... You’re right. I *am* trying to protect him.”

Valentino gritted his teeth and Vox squeezed his shoulder. “But I care for you too, Val. I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Liar,” growled Valentino. “You’ve never fucking cared about me. You’ll always choose him.” He yanked himself out of Vox’s grip, form flickering as he began to walk away.

Vox grabbed his hand and whirled him around again and his form solidified once more.

“I’m grieving,” Vox said softly. “I’ve lost my best friend. I’ve lost the man I put all my faith into. I’ve been betrayed. I’ve been to Purgatory and I’ve lost a piece of myself. I started to feel something for you and you betrayed me too. Val, I’m *breaking*.”

Valentino stared at him for a long moment. “Let me help you,” he murmured. He hesitated before smirking and brushing long fingers down the edge of Vox’s screen. “I can make you feel good. Take your mind off everything.”

Vox caught his hand and shook his head. “No.”

Valentino tensed. “You *asked* for us to take our frustrations out on each other. Am I suddenly not good enough for you? You’d prefer Alastor, is that it?”

Vox’s heart sank and he shook his head again. “You think sex is the only thing you can offer to keep me interested. You think I’ll leave if you don’t give me what I asked for, but the thing is, neither of us wants this.”

Fear flashed across Valentino’s gaze. “Vox-”

Vox grabbed his hand, clasp it between both of his. “Relax, Val. I’m not going anywhere. I want you to tell me what you really want. I want you to tell me how you *feel*, right now, in this moment.”

Surprise filtered across Valentino’s expression before he shook his head in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

Vox offered him a small smile. “You’re safe, Val. I promise. I’m finally listening.”

Valentino blinked before dropping his gaze to their linked hands. His eyes shone brighter as water collected in them.

“I want you, amorcito. I’ve always wanted you. Angel was... a mistake. I thought he could make me feel better but... I feel...” He trailed off, hunching in on himself a little before looking at Vox desperately. “I can give you anything you want, Voxy. Just ask and I’ll do it. You don’t *need* Alastor. I can treat you better, love you more, *give* you more... You just have to let me.”

Vox smiled sadly at him. “This isn’t about what I want. What do *you* want?”

“You,” Valentino said automatically and Vox pursed his lips before lifting a hand to his cheek, watching Valentino lean into his touch frantically.

They were alike in so many ways.

“I can make you feel so good,” Valentino whispered as he nuzzled into Vox’s hand. “Come to bed with me. We can work around the body thing. You can hypnotise me. Blindfold me. I don’t care. I just want to be with you. I want...” He trailed off again and Vox swept a thumb over his cheek.

“You want...?”

Valentino flinched.

“Come on, Val. Tell me. I promise you’re safe.”

Finally, Valentino looked at him, a tear sliding down his face. “I want you to take care of me.”

Vox’s chest ached and he made a soft, wounded sound before carefully pulling Valentino into a hug. He wrapped his arms tightly around the startled moth-demon, rubbing his back and carding his fingers through his undamaged antenna before petting his fur ruff, and Valentino began to tremble.

“I’ve got you,” Vox whispered as Valentino’s arms snaked around him, clutching desperately at his back and it wasn’t long before the moth-demon began to sob into his shoulder. “Let it out,” Vox murmured.

“I’m so fucking sorry,” Valentino cried. “I should never have cheated on you. I shouldn’t have left you when you revealed your body to me. I shouldn’t have agreed to your stupid proposal! I shouldn’t keep fucking you so hard that you can’t *walk*, I shouldn’t make you *bleed* and *brusie* just because I’m mad at you, and I... I just...” He squeezed Vox tighter. “I’m so fucking sorry. Tell me how to fix it. Tell me how to make it up to you.”

Vox weaved his fingers through Valentino’s ruff. “Hold me,” Vox whispered, taken aback by the confession. “Hold me and let me hold you and we’ll worry about everything else later. We’ll figure it out together, okay?”

Valentino sniffled against his shoulder and nodded.

“Let me take care of you the way you deserve,” Vox breathed and he was surprised when Valentino sank to his knees, pressing his face into Vox’s stomach as he clutched at him.

Vox stroked his damaged antenna as his heart cracked and twisted painfully.

“You deserve better than I’ve given you,” Vox breathed. “I should have paid more attention. I should have *noticed* you were hurting. I should have taken better care of you.”

“I shouldn’t have been so selfish,” Valentino whispered. “So jealous. I’m not innocent in this. Some of the things I said and did to you... Vox, I’ll *never* forgive myself.”

Something unexpectedly knitted itself together inside Vox and his breath hitched.

Could it really have been this easy?

Could they have had one genuine moment of vulnerability and stopped everything that was to come?

How many opportunities had they wasted? How many moments had they thrown away out of anger and mistrust?

Vox's breaths shook as he curled over Valentino protectively. "I'm sorry too. Things should have been different."

"I don't want to do this anymore," Valentino whimpered. "I don't want to keep hurting you. I don't want to sleep with you if it means degrading you and humiliating you and *injuring* you. I *love* you, Vox. And I know you'll never love me back. I *know* you won't. But I don't want to lose you. I know you're breaking. I know you've been through more than any man should, but somewhere inside you is the man who gave me a chance. The man who smiled at me and made me feel *good* about myself and rescued me from being someone's worthless *whore* and I... I'll never stop loving you, Vox. I'll always be grateful for what you did for me."

Vox realised he was crying, shoulders shaking as he buried his face into Valentino's fluffy antenna and clutched desperately at his ruff.

Fuck, he had forgotten about all that. He had forgotten how their relationship started, how innocent it had been, how *hopeful*. They had been friends.

Roo had ruined it all. She had manipulated Valentino, forced him to threaten Alastor, and everything had spiralled from there.

Man. Valentino had called him a *man*, Vox realised. Not a machine. Not a robot.

"Damn it, I *miss* you," Vox wept as he held Valentino tighter. "This shouldn't have happened. You, me, and Alastor... We should have been *friends*. We could have healed each other. We could have trusted each other. It didn't have to be this way. If we had all just *listened* to each other-

Vox realised that he was alone.

There was no corridor, no Valentino, only darkness.

He wiped his tears away with his arm and stood, knees threatening to buckle. “I’m sorry, Val,” he whispered into the void.

A house shimmered into view in front of him, a familiar demon with it.

Vox shuffled forwards as relief flooded his chest and he snaked his arms around Alastor and pressed his face into his hair. Alastor quickly laid his hands over Vox’s and Vox nearly sobbed.

“I think I know what we’re supposed to do here,” Vox murmured.

“So do I,” Alastor said tiredly and Vox squeezed him, seeking comfort, before releasing him and slotting their hands together.

They stepped into the house.

As a younger Valentino and Alastor argued, the distress on Valentino’s face became more apparent. He didn’t want to do this. He was being forced to. It was a pity neither Vox nor Alastor had figured it out at the time.

“I know you were raped.”

The hesitation was obvious and Vox watched Alastor - the *real* Alastor - press his lips together as his ears lowered. He saw it too.

“If you... I’ll tell him. If you keep seeing him. If you’re disobedient. I’ll tell him. I’ll tell all of Hell.”

Disobedient. Valentino had tried to give Alastor hints, but Alastor had been too upset, too *fearful* to notice.

The conversation spiralled and Alastor swallowed as he watched his younger self react with anger.

“Wretched filth!” Alastor’s past self hissed as he advanced on Valentino, radio filters interfering with his words. “I knew you couldn’t be trusted!”

Valentino picked himself up off the floor and threw Alastor a distressed look. “...You really should learn to *respect* your master.”

Shadows curled around the moth-demon’s arms and legs, restraining him as Alastor wrapped sharp claws around Valentino’s throat, smirking as rivulets of blood trickled down purple skin.

“*Respect your master,*” Alastor murmured to Vox quietly. “He was trying to tell me.”

“He was asking for help,” Vox agreed softly.

“I knew you were desperate for his attention, but I never thought you’d stoop so low,” Alastor’s younger self sneered at the writhing moth. “Working with her will be your downfall. She lies. She’ll use you until she has no need for you and then, she’ll extinguish your soul. She’ll make you *burn*.”

Valentino threw him a wild-eyed look and the older Alastor, the *wiser* Alastor grimaced again.

“Vox pities you, but he will never truly care for you in the way you want him to,” Alastor’s past self drawled. “How could he? You mean nothing to anyone. It’s a bit of a running pattern, isn’t it? Your unrequited love, I mean. At least you’ll be a good *scapegoat* if Vox ever gets into a tricky situation...”

Valentino's eyes widened as he stilled and the younger Alastor's smirk hitched higher. "What? You're not the only one who knows a few secrets."

Alastor's ears dropped lower and Vox squeezed his shoulder. "You didn't know. You thought he was threatening you."

"I should have paid more attention," Alastor muttered. "There was so much fear in him."

The younger Valentino scowled, struggling against Alastor's shadows before he made a sound of frustration. "I don't... I never wanted..." He clamped his mouth shut, looking angrily at the floor before he glowered at Alastor.

Vox glanced at his lover. "This trial isn't about forgiveness, is it?"

Alastor shook his head. "It's about understanding his perspective."

Vox's shoulders slumped. "It's about realising we could have done things differently."

Alastor nodded and watched himself rake his claws through the moth-demon's cheek.

"What exactly is your plan here? Vox will suspect there is something wrong if I stop seeing him. Do you really think he'll suddenly take an interest in you? Are you so desperate, so *stupid* that you believe he'll so easily *replace* me with you? You were alone in life and you'll be alone in death. No one will ever want you, you perverted creature."

The anger behind Valentino's gaze grew. "Vox cares about me."

"He feels *sorry* for you. Like one feels sorry for a helpless creature with a fractured limb. You're weak. *Broken*."

Valentino gritted his teeth. “*I’m* broken? You’re the one who can’t stand touch! The desperate one. The one who gets *pissy* every time Vox shows a scrap of attention to anyone that isn’t you. You’re the one who lives in constant fear of people thinking you’re *pretty*. You can’t cope with anything relating to sex! This is Hell, asshole! People don’t earn a place down here for being nice. Instead of being a *coward*, just accept that awful shit is going to happen to you down here and *move on*. ”

The younger Alastor bristled. “And yet you’re the one trying to force himself upon Vox. You were turned into a *whore* by your own lover, you were abandoned by him, and now you strut around Hell, putting every inch of your body on display because you know that’s all anyone will ever want you for. Because you know that is all you’re good for. You are a mere tool for other demons’ enjoyment and that’s all you’ll ever be.”

There was a pause as they stared at each other and Alastor eased his grip on Valentino’s throat a fraction, and suddenly, all Hell broke loose.

Valentino pounced on Alastor and kissed him in a desperate attempt to escape and the younger Alastor lost control of his shadows, allowing Valentino to push him against the wall and lay a hand over his crotch.

“You’ll never be able to give Vox what he wants,” Valentino whispered against his lips and the tone was bitter but the words cracked a little as he said them.

The moth-demon screamed as Alastor’s silhouette lunged for him, vicious and merciless as it clawed and bit and dragged Valentino around like a ragdoll.

The younger Alastor trembled against the wall, grappling with his own memories, and with a sigh, the older Alastor touched his shoulder and took control.

“Stop,” Alastor commanded of his silhouette and Vox mused over how much *calmer* this Alastor sounded compared to his past self - how much more in control.

How *tired*.

The silhouette looked at him in confusion as Alastor stood straighter. “Let him go.”

The silhouette hesitated.

“Release him,” growled Alastor. “Something is wrong.”

The silhouette reluctantly released the bloodied and bruised moth and Alastor offered him a hand, which earned him a flinch.

“Something is *wrong*,” Alastor said again, softer, as he crouched down to be on eye-level with Valentino. “Is she making you do this?”

Valentino’s eyes widened as he snapped his gaze to Alastor. His antennae drooped as he shook his head fearfully.

“It’s alright,” Alastor murmured. “She holds no power outside the bookshop. As long as you aren’t on her chain, she can’t hurt you. Is she forcing you to confront me, Valentino?”

“...You’re lying,” Valentino whispered as he cowered away from Alastor.

“I’ve no reason to lie,” Alastor said, freezing when Valentino revealed a gun and aimed it between his eyes. He put his hands out placatingly then pointed to his head. “Did she do that to you? To your antenna?”

Valentino’s grip on the gun wavered. “I’ll tell them. I’ll tell everyone. All of Hell. They’ll all know what you suffered through.”

His words faltered and Alastor frowned. *Suffered*. Valentino empathised with him. "...You don't want to though, do you?"

Valentino trembled. "I'll fucking do it!"

"I can help you," Alastor said quietly. "Vox and I... We can keep you safe. We don't have to compete over him. That's what she wants us to do."

Valentino lowered the gun a fraction, eyebrows raised. "...You want to help me?"

There was a knock at the door.

Alastor glanced at it before offering Valentino his hand again. "We can explain it to him together. What do you say?"

Valentino eyed his hand warily and there was another knock.

"Come in," Alastor called and there was the sound of a lock turning. A younger Vox stepped into the house and before he had a chance to panic about the state of them both, the older Vox touched his arm.

"What happened?" Vox asked, approaching them both, and Alastor remained on the floor.

"Valentino has been threatened," he said, glancing at the frozen moth-demon. "He was told to come here and warn me away from you."

"Warn you away? Why?" Vox asked patiently as he turned to Valentino, and the moth-demon shrunk back from them for a few seconds before his expression crumpled and he doubled over on himself.

“I’m sorry! I never wanted to! I told her *no*. I told her neither of you deserved it, that I wouldn’t play along with her sick game, but she... she tried to fucking burn me alive! Threatened to torture me if I disobeyed and I- oh, *shit!* I wasn’t supposed to tell you! Oh, fuck! She’s going to kill me! She’s going to-”

“Easy,” Vox murmured as he laid a hand on Valentino’s shoulder. “Take it easy, Val. She isn’t going to hurt you. We won’t let her. She has no power here.”

Valentino stilled and looked between them both, confused. “...You’re... being nice to me.” He stared at Alastor’s wounds. “Even after I was cruel to you...”

Alastor waved a hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about that. We were both a little... emotional.” He placed a hand on Valentino’s knee and Valentino baulked at him. “Tell us what happened.”

Valentino’s gaze flicked between them both in disbelief before his antennae perked up.

“You... don’t hate me?”

Vox smiled sadly. “No, Val. We want to help.”

His gaze glittered with tears and he let out a relieved sob and dragged them both against his sides.

“I’m sorry,” he whined as he squeezed them both tighter. “I tried to defy her. I didn’t want to hurt Alastor and I want what you both have, but I’m not a monster! I don’t want to destroy your relationship!”

Alastor and Vox shared a miserable look. “We know,” Alastor murmured. “We know you aren’t that cruel.”

“Exactly!” Valentino said indignantly before he curled his battered wings around them both. “Fuck. Thank you. *Thank you*. I thought... I thought I had no choice. I was so fucking scared of what she’d do if I didn’t follow her orders.”

He laughed weakly and squeezed them both affectionately. “I’m so fucking lucky you noticed something was wrong. That I didn’t mean any of it. Imagine what could have happened if you hadn’t figured it out!”

Vox’s heart sank and he shot Alastor a haunted look. Alastor’s eyes were wide, ears flat.

“Yes. Imagine that,” Alastor whispered.

Valentino squeaked happily before choking out another sob and dragging them into his chest. “Fuck, I love you both so much.”

Vox swallowed as Alastor inhaled sharply.

They slowly, reluctantly returned Valentino’s embrace.

With another happy squeak and an affectionate squeeze, Valentino dissolved into the darkness, the house fading with him.

Vox and Alastor stared at the space he had occupied before turning to each other with hollow gazes.

“...Do you think if we had... If we had paid more attention, do you think things would have been different?” Vox asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Alastor said helplessly.

“Do you think it would have stopped all of us from going through fifty years of pain?” Vox breathed, chest stinging.

“I don’t...” Alastor winced. “...Maybe? I’m not sure. We’ll never know.”

Vox licked his lips and pushed himself to his feet, helping Alastor up. They looked at each other for a long moment before Vox tugged Alastor against him, snaking an arm around his back and threading his fingers through his hair as Alastor clutched at his back and waist. They pressed their foreheads together, pulsing reassuring, comforting static between each other, before Alastor shifted to seal their lips together instead.

“I missed you,” Vox breathed, tightening his grip on Alastor. “Fuck, I missed you. Was scared I wouldn’t see you again.”

Alastor nuzzled against his screen, pressing into Vox’s body. “I’m here.”

Vox kissed Alastor hard and demanding and Alastor responded eagerly, letting Vox lap into his mouth.

There was a sinister toll of a bell and they startled and whipped their heads around to face the gate with stone pillars from earlier. On each pillar, there were now six small, red lights. On both pillars, one light turned green.

Vox shuddered. “Five trials left,” he whispered before glancing at Alastor. “Al... I don’t know if I can go through that five more times.”

Alastor cupped his cheek with a determined frown. “You can. You will. You *must*. If not to save Charlie, then do it for *me*. I need us both to survive this. We’ve come too far not to.”

Vox peppered desperate kisses over an ear. “No one has beaten them before.”

“I refuse to die here,” Alastor growled, sinking his fingers into the ports at the back of Vox’s head. “Not when we have so much to live for. We *will* be the first to pass these trials, Vox. We’ll drag each other through them if we have to.”

The bell tolled again, impatient.

“We’ll proceed when we’re damn ready,” snarled Alastor before he dragged Vox into another searing kiss. Vox fisted his hair hungrily. He needed this to get through whatever heartache was in store for them next.

Alastor nipped at his lip and Vox tugged his hair, tipping his head back and nipping at his neck. Alastor made a soft noise of pleasure and Vox unravelled his tie, unfastened his top buttons and mouthed hotly at the juncture where shoulder met neck.

Alastor moaned softly and Vox pulled back to survey his handiwork once he was satisfied. He swept his thumb over the tender bruise.

“In case we get separated in the next trial, there’s something for you to remember me by,” Vox purred and Alastor’s eyes flashed with desire as he suddenly dropped to his knees, unzipped Vox’s trousers, teased down his underwear, and wrapped his lips around Vox’s dick.

Vox’s breath hitched as Alastor kissed and licked and sucked him like he was starving for it, and he curled his fingers tighter into Alastor’s hair, forcing his hips to remain still.

Alastor glanced up at him with a wicked smirk as he bobbed his head and Vox exhaled shakily.

“Al...”

There wasn’t a hint of hesitation in Alastor’s eyes as he worked Vox’s cock to an aching hardness and his tongue was ruthless, fingers pressing hard into Vox’s hips - hard enough to leave marks - and when Vox made a strained sound, squeezing Alastor’s ear in warning,

Alastor pulled off him with a vicious grin and Vox choked as he was left teetering on the edge of a precipice.

He whimpered when Alastor tucked him back in, zipping up his trousers with an amused smirk. His lips were raw and swollen and Vox stared at him in disbelief as he tapped his bulging crotch like he was patting a dog.

“A little something to remember me by if we get separated,” Alastor drawled.

Vox whined pathetically. “What the *fuck*, Al? Where did that come from?” He glanced down at the strain in his trousers. “How am I supposed to go through a trial like this?”

Alastor grinned, toying with one of his antennae. “Complete the trial and you can have your reward,” he purred. “Consider it an *incentive*.”

“Oh, I think I need a little more encouragement,” said Vox as he dragged Alastor in for a filthy kiss, one hand wrapped around his waist as he rutted against the front of Alastor’s trousers. He smirked at the small tent there. “Y’know... I could help with that little problem...”

Alastor chuckled against his lips. “*After* the next trial.” He put a hand between them and smiled adoringly at Vox. Vox huffed a laugh.

“You’d be a fantastic motivational speaker.”

Alastor snorted and pecked Vox’s cheek before winding their arms together and heading towards the gate. He halted before they passed through it.

“Ready?” he asked seriously.

Vox carded his fingers through Alastor’s hair, along his jaw and down his neck.

“Ready,” he whispered, a determined flame sparking in his chest when Alastor nuzzled into his palm.

They could beat this.

They could beat *her*.

They passed through the gates.

Chapter End Notes

One trial down! Five to go! >:)

For those who are curious where the 'scenes' have come from, you can find the original ones in the following chapters:

Alastor's scenes: 41, 37, 31, 29, 18

Vox's scenes: 47, 44, 40, 32, 18

Chapter 55: Lust

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“A pity you were both too selfish to notice Valentino’s predicament. You might have been able to save him from becoming the vile thing he is now...”

“Oh, here we fucking go,” muttered Vox under his breath, earning an amused smile from Alastor. “One step through the gates and Little Miss Sunshine is already stirring that nice steamy pot of horse shit.”

Alastor bit back a laugh as Vox wound a protective arm around him.

“You know,” said Vox sweetly. “You could have saved him too - by not threatening to burn him alive if he didn’t go along with your twisted plans.”

“I have to eat, little picturebox.”

Vox smiled. “I wish you’d fucking starve.”

The air grew colder. “Mind your attitude. You’re in my domain now.”

Vox chuckled darkly. “Nah. I’m in your *prison*. And you *need* us to let you out. So you mind your fucking attitude, princess, because we’re the ones doing *you* a favour.”

Alastor glanced at Vox in surprise, heart racing at the thrill of Vox standing up to their much more powerful master.

“Lucifer will intervene eventually,” growled Roo, her voice clearer as an icy wind picked up around them. “I don’t *need* either of you.”

“Have you ever actually seen this supposed ‘backdoor’?” Alastor drawled.

“No. Only the Archangels know how to access it.”

Alastor chuckled. “Are you sure it exists? If you’ve never seen it being used, how can you be certain? And how can you be certain that you can actually escape through it? What if it only allows Archangels through?”

“It won’t.”

“It might,” teased Alastor. “Or it might not exist at all. After all, if the Archangels created a complex prison to keep you detained, why would they also create a backdoor through which you could escape? Seems rather counterintuitive, wouldn’t you say?”

Roo fell silent and Alastor’s grin widened. “What? No witty remarks? No protests? Why, *master*, I’m disappointed.”

They both winced at the fresh pain in their arms and they glanced down to see a new word being carved there.

Lust.

Alastor’s ears fell and Vox quickly pulled him against his body and cupped his cheek. “You can do this,” he whispered. “No matter what happens, no matter what you see or hear or feel, you can get through this. You’re the strongest man I know, Alastor. You can beat this.”

Alastor curled his fingers into Vox's waistcoat. "I... Vox, I don't know if I can..."

Vox swept a thumb over his cheek. "You've beaten this trial once before. You can do it again. I know you can."

Alastor's heart raced, breaths going shallow as he recalled the last time he had faced this trial. It had started with his rapists and ended with Vox leering down at him, violating him in every way possible, degrading him, hurting him-

He frowned and met Vox's gentle gaze.

Vox would *never* do any of that to him. Last time had been different; they had been *enemies*, or at least they were pretending to be, and there had been so much distrust and betrayal and pain between them, and it had taken Alastor a long time to convince himself that Vox wouldn't violate him like that, even if they supposedly loathed each other.

But now? The very idea of Vox ignoring a mumbled 'yellow' was laughable. Vox loved him with every fibre of his being - Alastor was *safe* with him. What he had faced in the last Lust trial was impossible.

Alastor's ears perked up. He could do this. The Vox he had to face wasn't *his* Vox - just something that looked vaguely like him.

And if he could convince himself that the thing chasing him wasn't actually Vox, that meant he could *fight back*. He could make it *bleed*. He could torture it, destroy it, make it regret ever having chased him.

"There's that fire in those eyes," Vox growled, pleased as he caught Alastor's chin between a finger and thumb. "You can beat this, Al. No one lays a finger on the Radio Demon and gets away with it. Rip its fucking limbs off, sweetheart."

“*It*’ might be in the shape of you,” Alastor said.

“Then smash its fucking screen in,” Vox scoffed before holding Alastor’s gaze. “It might look like me, but it *isn’t* me. If it so much as touches you, you rip out every wire it has. Because if you don’t, *I will*. And I’ll use them to tear off its damn *balls*.”

Alastor’s smile widened, tail fluffing before he snuggled against Vox’s chest and tucked his face into his neck. Vox immediately petted his ears and carded his fingers through his hair and Alastor hummed happily.

“You don’t let it hurt you,” Vox growled quietly. “You’ve come too far, suffered through too much *bullshit* to let it undo everything you’ve achieved. You’ve done incredibly well, Al. Don’t let it take that away from you. Don’t let it break you again. You’re the fucking Radio Demon. Make it understand why it should *fear* you.”

Alastor’s arms snaked into Vox’s coat, clutching at his back as he mouthed kisses against his lover’s neck.

“Thank you, Vox,” Alastor whispered and Vox squeezed him tightly.

He could do this.

Not just for Vox, but for himself too. Vox was right; he’d worked too hard to go backwards now. He *enjoyed* being sexually intimate with Vox and he wasn’t going to let this damn trial take away something he found pleasure in. He’d killed for less.

“Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me.”

Alastor raised an eyebrow and pulled back to stare at Vox, who pointed behind Alastor with an unimpressed look. Alastor turned and saw two doors side-by-side; one blue and one red.

“I wonder which door we’re each supposed to go through?” Vox asked sarcastically.

Alastor snorted. “Well, my favourite colour is blue, so...”

Vox rolled his eyes and idly rubbed Alastor’s back. “You ready?”

Alastor nodded. “See you soon, my love,” he said before tracing a finger over Vox’s slowly softening dick. “After all, you have a reward to claim...”

“Bastard.”

Alastor cackled and sauntered towards the red door, making sure to swing his hips a little so Vox could ogle his ass.

“Nothing, and I mean *nothing*, could stop me from beating this trial, so you’d better be waiting for me on the other side!” Vox called after him and Alastor grinned before closing the door behind him.

He looked around, steeling himself for a chase through a dark forest.

Only to realise that he was in... his bedroom?

His and *Harriet’s* bedroom.

He frowned in confusion and scratched his head, then blinked at the lack of ears. He dropped his hand and found brown skin instead of red and black. He glanced down at himself, at his white shirt and black trousers and crimson waistcoat - the outfit he used to present his radio shows in.

Back when he was *alive*.

He touched his face. The hair was shorter, the antlers were gone and he... he was *human*.

There was a full-length mirror in the corner of his old bedroom and he approached it slowly, breath hitching at warm, chocolate eyes and styled, black hair. He looked young. Late twenties, early thirties... He had forgotten what he looked like as a human. His death had been a century ago.

The only thing that didn't quite fit was the forced grin.

He looked down at his fingers, noticing one of his father's rings, and his heart clenched painfully. He wondered what had happened to it, where it had gone. He touched the ring reverently before turning and looking around the room. It was filled with trinkets from his and Harriet's past; books and ornaments and paintings and... and his mother's jewellery box; the one he had given to Harriet after she had died.

He swallowed and edged towards it, touching its varnished surface as though it was something precious.

"She'd be so disappointed in you."

Alastor startled and turned to find Harriet watching him, with her blonde ringlets and emerald eyes and pretty summer dress. She crossed her arms and looked at him in disdain.

"Excuse me?" Alastor asked quietly.

"Letting your rapists turn you into a *fag*."

Alastor's eyes widened as he stiffened. "I beg your pardon?"

Harriet wrinkled her nose in distaste. “That’s why you stopped touching me. Why you couldn’t be intimate with me. They broke something inside your brain. You pretended you were traumatised, but really, you were craving *cocks*.”

Alastor pressed himself against the dresser as she advanced on him, clutching tightly at its edge. “That isn’t true. I... I *was* traumatised.”

“Your father would be so disgusted. Raising a weak, little fairy.”

Alastor swallowed thickly. Would his father disapprove? He was from a time where most people would, so maybe...?

He shook his head. “It isn’t like that. I never had any interest in men until Vox. Vox was... He was sweet and protective and so full of *hope* and-”

“It’s *vile*,” Harriet hissed. “You were starving for it, weren’t you? It wasn’t enough to have three men overpower you and use you as they pleased, you had to find a powerful *Overlord* and suck his cock like a filthy *whore*.” She sneered at him. “Face it, being raped turned you into a needy cock-sucker.”

Alastor’s breaths shook. “...No. No, that wasn’t- Vox *loves* me. He’s kind and patient and understanding, and it took *years* for me to figure out that I was in love with him too.”

“What would your mother say?” Harriet asked with a disgusted curl of her lips. “Her only son letting himself be *fucked* by another man. She’d roll in her grave. She *died* and you let her murderers turn you gay. Imagine how she’d *weep*.”

Alastor shrank back slightly, guilt pulling at his heart. Would she be upset to learn of Vox? She had been so pleased when he brought Harriet home. They got on incredibly well and his father always said how proud he was that Alastor had found such an ‘educated, forward-thinking, beautiful girl’. Would he have the same reaction if he met Vox?

“You left me for a *man*, Alastor,” Harriet growled. “Your desires are *perverse*.”

No, that wasn’t right. He hadn’t *left* Harriet for a man. Vox had come far later.

“You... You left me,” Alastor said slowly.

“Because you weren’t attracted to me anymore!” she hissed. “You enjoyed what those men did to you. You got hard at their touch. You moaned when their cocks passed your lips. You *wanted* more. You wanted them to use you like the foul pervert you are.”

“I didn’t,” Alastor said. He *had* grown hard at their touch, but Vox had taught him that was ok. It was just friction. Pressure. That didn’t mean he had *wanted* it.

“You don’t want gentleness and sweetness and *love*, you want to be overpowered. You want to be manhandled. You want to be *used*. That’s why you’re so desperate for Vox to bend you over and fuck you. It isn’t about patience or overcoming *trauma*. You’re just scared because you know if you let him do that to you, you’ll be truly depraved. A disgrace to your parents. It’s the final line to cross, isn’t it?”

Alastor licked his lips and gripped the dresser harder. “They wouldn’t be disappointed,” he murmured.

“We would.”

Alastor flinched at his father’s deep voice and he twisted to see his parents glaring at him in disgust.

His breath hitched at the bullet hole between his mother’s eyes and the gaping wounds littered throughout his father’s body where Alastor’s attackers had hacked into him with his own axe.

Alastor fell silent, unable to breathe. It had been over a century since he had seen their faces and now they sneered at him in distaste.

“I didn’t raise my son to be a queer,” growled his father as his mother shook her head in obvious distress.

“You gave up Harriet for an Overlord from Hell? Have you no shame, Alastor?” Tears rolled down her cheeks and bile crept up Alastor’s throat.

“I... I didn’t give her up. She left me.”

“And rightly so too,” huffed his father, bringing his pipe to his lips. “The things you let those men do to you. The things you let them do to your mother and me...”

“Oh, Alastor, how could you?” cried his mother. “Look at us! Look what they did! And you made *love* to them!”

The wind was sucked out of Alastor’s lungs as his eyes widened. He shook his head desperately. “No! No! I... I didn’t! They forced me! Violated me! *Raped* me!”

“A real man doesn’t get *raped*,” his father said. “Men don’t get raped, especially not by other men. That’s called being a pansy, boy. You let them catch you. You *wanted* it.”

Alastor’s jaw clicked shut as his breaths shallowed. Shame washed over him, threatening to drown him, and he couldn’t bear to meet his parents’ gazes any longer.

“Vox said-”

“Vox? Is that the fag whose cock you’re sucking?” growled his father. “Do you get on your knees for him? Do you beg him to fuck you?”

His mother sobbed harder, head in her hands at Alastor shrunk away from them.

Perhaps they were right. Perhaps being raped had turned him gay. Perhaps he had enjoyed it. Perhaps he wasn’t a *real man*.

He was glad they hadn’t seen him give up Harriet. They *would* have been disappointed in him. Disgusted by him. They would have disowned him. Abandoned him. His friends would have ridiculed him.

Or he would have turned Vox into his dirty little secret - and Vox didn’t deserve that. Vox was *comfortable* with who he was, but Alastor... Alastor wasn’t sure what he was. Since being raped, the only person he’d ever felt any attraction to was *Vox*. Maybe they had broken something in his brain. Maybe there was something wrong with him; something perverse and disgraceful.

“Alastor.”

“How could you watch them shoot me and then offer your body to them?” asked his mother through her tears. “Did it arouse you? The sight of my blood? Their power over me? Did it excite you? Did you like them chasing you?”

Alastor shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Alastor.”

“Admit it, boy! You wanted them to catch you! You were *curious* what it would feel like! Then once you’d had them, nothing else would suffice. *That’s* why you were no longer interested in Harriet!” His father clenched a fist.

Alastor gritted his teeth. “No.”

“*Alastor.*”

“That’s why you wanted Vox,” Harriet said. “You were drawn to his power, to his *strength*. You wanted that thrill again, but you got *scared* because this time you couldn’t hide behind the lie of being *raped*. Everyone would know you were a fairy.”

Alastor flinched. “That’s not...” He trailed off, not daring to look at anyone.

Gentle fingers touched his cheeks and his eyes flew open, gaze landing on a man he didn’t recognise - an attractive man with tanned skin, dark hair, well-sculpted features, and eyes of different colours - one a rich brown and the other a striking blue.

At first, Alastor tensed, but then the man smiled gently and brushed his thumb over his cheek and Alastor lost his breath.

“Vox?” he whispered.

The man nodded.

Alastor stared at him for a moment longer.

Damn.

Was this how Vox had looked as a human? Because... *damn*.

Alastor opened his mouth then closed it again, eyebrows climbing higher as he drank in the sight of Vox's broad shoulders and the lean muscle beneath his navy shirt, and his long fingers and angular hips and-

Damn.

He was *beautiful*.

And those *eyes*. Fuck, they were incredible. Alastor's heart raced and there were a thousand butterflies in his chest and he couldn't tear his gaze away from those enchanting eyes and *those plush pink lips*-

He raised a hand to Vox's cheek, mesmerised by his high cheekbones and unblemished skin and his soft, kissable lips and *those eyes*...

"You foul, repulsive creature," snarled his father. "They should have *killed* you that night, like you let them kill your mother and me."

Alastor flinched, retracting his hand from Vox's cheek, but Vox took his hand and smiled sadly. "Al, they aren't your parents."

Alastor frowned. "Yes, they are."

"No," said Vox patiently. "You've told me about your parents. They wouldn't react like this."

Alastor blinked, staring at Vox for a long moment, and he glanced down when Vox suddenly boxed him in against the dresser, hands either side of him, their bodies almost flush, shielding Alastor from view of Harriet and his parents.

"I might not have met them, but with what you've told me, Al... it sounds like they just wanted you to be happy," Vox said softly. "They wouldn't care who you were with as long as

you were happy.”

Alastor opened his mouth then closed it again. “Vox... The time they were from... The time *I* was from... They would’ve been *ashamed*.”

“Your father came after those men with a fucking *axe*, Al,” Vox huffed. “Do you really think he’d say any of this shit?” He gestured behind him, to Alastor’s now-silent father. “He told you to run, he tried to *save* you... He loved you. They both did.” Vox smiled. “They’d be *proud* of you for how much you’ve overcome.”

Alastor lowered his head a fraction. “They’d be upset. I’m a disgrace. I went to *Hell*. I let their murderers arouse me and turn my attentions away from my fiancée...”

“No, fuck that,” growled Vox, cupping Alastor’s cheek.

“He’s right,” Harriet purred as she stalked towards them. “He’s *shamed* his family. Look at him. Look at the wretched thing he’s become.”

Alastor winced and Vox cast Harriet a withering glare over his shoulder. “Shut the fuck up,” he snarled. “You left him. You left him when he needed you most, when he was *hurting*, when he felt filthy and violated. You should have taken care of him!”

“He’s the man,” Harriet scoffed. “He’s supposed to take care of me. His father is right - he’s not a *real* man.”

Vox bristled and rounded on Harriet, placing himself in front of Alastor with bared teeth. “You were supposed to love him through the bad stuff too, not only when it was *convenient* for you! He *needed* you! He needed someone to be patient and understanding and you *abandoned* him! You left him to figure everything out alone! You didn’t *deserve* him!”

“He lost interest in me,” Harriet scoffed. “I had no reason to stay.”

“He was *traumatised*, you bitch! He was *breaking*! And you did nothing! You made him suffer in silence! You didn’t even try to comfort him, you selfish piece of shit!”

Harriet reared backwards as Alastor glanced up at Vox curiously.

“You were supposed to love him,” Vox said fiercely. “You were supposed to reassure him and help him work through his feelings. You were supposed to support him and hold him through his nightmares and coax him out of his flashbacks and make him feel *safe*!”

Alastor straightened. Vox had done that. Vox had done all of that.

“You don’t know what it was like,” hissed Harriet. “How embarrassing it was to watch him flinch whenever I tried to touch him. He could barely look at me. He couldn’t get aroused. He wouldn’t touch me. He couldn’t do *anything*. He just wanted to taste another cock on his tongue.” She propped her hands on her hips. “How do you think that made me feel?”

Vox shook his head in disgust before returning his attention to Alastor and brushing his fingers through his hair with a gentle gaze. “It wasn’t about *you*,” he growled at her. “It was never about you. You’re just too selfish to realise that.”

Alastor’s eyes fluttered shut as Vox’s palm smoothed over his cheek. He leaned into his lover’s warm touch, curling his fingers desperately into Vox’s turtleneck and tugging him a fraction closer.

Vox was taller than him by a couple of inches and his lover had to bend down a little to press their foreheads together. There was a tiny pulse of static between them that had them both smiling in amusement.

Vox brushed his lips against Alastor’s forehead. “I didn’t realise you were struggling with this. Does being with a man bother you?” he whispered.

“I... I don’t know,” admitted Alastor as he tucked his head under Vox’s chin. “I love you. I enjoy being with you. I wouldn’t want to be with anyone else.” He splayed his hand over Vox’s chest. “I’m just... not sure if that means I *liked* how it felt when they...” He trailed off with a frown and pulled back to look at Vox worriedly. “What if they did ‘turn me gay’? What if being with them made me realise that I *like* being intimate with other men? That means I must have enjoyed *some* of what they did, right?”

“Yes,” said Harriet. “You’re a filthy pervert.”

Vox ignored her and brushed Alastor’s hair away from his face. “Why did you fall in love with me, Al? Was it because of my dick? Or was it something else?”

Alastor pulled a face. “You know why. Your patience, your intelligence, your kindness, your playful nature... Everything. I fell in love with everything about you.”

“If I’d been a woman, would that have changed the way you feel?”

Alastor frowned. “No.” His eyes widened. “Oh.”

Vox chuckled and kissed Alastor’s forehead once more. “Have you ever considered that gender might not matter to you as much as you thought it did?”

“Well, I have *now*,” Alastor murmured as he snuggled closer to Vox, and Vox chuckled and snaked an arm around his back.

“Harriet’s talking shit. The monsters that violated you, they didn’t ‘turn you gay’. You didn’t suddenly start craving dicks or wanting to be overpowered because of what happened. You fell in love with my *charming* personality,” Vox murmured as he rubbed Alastor’s back. “It’s pure coincidence that there’s a dick attached to it.”

“And that you have a penis,” Alastor teased and Vox huffed a laugh and tangled his fingers in his hair, squeezing him gently as he pressed a kiss atop his head.

Alastor cuddled closer, closing his eyes. He felt... safe. He fit so perfectly into Vox's human body, almost as though they were made for each other.

"Your parents would be so upset to learn what Harriet put you through," Vox breathed. "They would be heartbroken to find out that she had abandoned you when you needed her most, after all the love and support you gave her. They would have told you to leave her. They wouldn't have let you suffer her abuse and selfishness for as long as you did. They would have *protected* you, just like they always did."

Alastor's breathing slowed as he listened to the soothing beat of Vox's heart.

"They loved you dearly, Al. They wanted you to be happy. They would have been there for you every step of the way after what those men did. They'd be so proud of how far you've come, even if you did end up in Hell."

Alastor melted into Vox, smiling when Vox peppered kisses over his hair. "Introduce me," Vox whispered. "I want to meet them."

Alastor clutched at Vox's shirt, burying his face into his chest for a moment as he breathed in his lover's familiar scent of copper and salt and ozone.

Fuck, he loved this man.

This beautiful, considerate man.

He leaned back to look at Vox, at his lopsided smile and his feathered hair and his pretty eyes, and his heart began to race and stutter, suddenly too big for his chest. He touched Vox's cheek reverently, breath catching when Vox pressed his lips to the pads of his fingers.

Alastor let his hand drop to Vox's chest and down to his stomach before splaying possessively over his back as he turned Vox around and led him towards his parents.

When he reached them, Alastor swallowed but refused to recoil his arm.

"Mom, Dad... This is Vox. My..." He hesitated as he glanced at Vox. "This is the man I love."

His parents continued to scowl for a few seconds before their expressions melted into something warmer and kinder.

"A pleasure to finally meet you, boy," Alastor's father said brightly as he offered Vox a hand. "I hear you're taking good care of our son?"

Vox smiled and shook his hand firmly as he wound an arm around Alastor. "Doing my best, sir."

"Oh, isn't he *handsome*?" Alastor's mother chirped, clasping her hands together. "What a *darling* boy! Allie, you've outdone yourself! A much better match than that horrible woman you were going to marry."

Alastor's cheeks darkened and Vox snickered at the pet name.

"How can you claim to love him when you can't even let him *fuck* you?"

Alastor flinched and glanced behind him at a scowling Harriet.

"How can you claim to love him when there's so much you can't give him?" she asked haughtily. "Face it, Alastor. You'll always leave him wanting. You're not good enough, not strong enough to overcome *everything*. You'll never be able to satisfy him. You'll never be able to give him the pleasure he *deserves*."

Alastor fell silent, guilt tugging at his chest. She was quite correct. He would likely never be able to give Vox all of himself...

Vox's hands were on him, turning him around, forcing him to look up.

"You just dropped to your knees and sucked my brain through my dick," Vox said solemnly, earning a wide-eyed look of surprise from Alastor. "Al, what exactly is it that you think you can't give me?"

Alastor licked his lips, embarrassed. "I can't let you... I can't give you..." He trailed off, averting his gaze.

"So, *one* thing," Vox said firmly with a frown. "One thing that most men don't like anyway?"

"I *want* to give that to you, but I just... I *can't*..."

"Do you see me disappointed?" Vox asked. "Or upset?" He wrapped both arms around Alastor and pulled him against his chest. "If I never get to put my cock in your ass, then I'm hardly going to cry about it. You should be pleased with how much you've already given me, Al. I never expected us to get this far and I was quite happy with never getting to see you naked."

He grinned brilliantly. "But damn it, Alastor! You've let me touch every inch of you! You let me kiss you and hold you and you've worshipped my body and *fucked* me and..." He shook his head and huffed out a laugh before leaning their heads together. "You've given me so much of yourself. Do you know how lucky I feel? You make me *happy*. I don't care whether you let me fuck you or not - I *know* you trust me. I *know* you love me. You've proven it time and time again and nothing will change that."

Alastor clutched Vox a fraction tighter. "I... I want to give you what I gave *them*."

Vox scowled and caught Alastor's chin, forcing him to look up. "You didn't *give* them anything. They *took* it. I refuse to *take* anything from you, Al. We go at a comfortable pace for both of us. You give what you're comfortable with and not an inch more."

Heat prickled behind Alastor's eyes.

"They'll always *own* you," Harriet purred. "Vox may have most of you, but they'll always have that one piece that you can't give. You'll always remember how they felt inside you because you'll never let anyone have you like that again."

Vox startled, staring at her with wide eyes before he looked back to Alastor. Alastor buried his face against Vox's chest, fighting back tears.

Slowly, Vox rubbed his back. "...I didn't realise," Vox whispered and Alastor's shoulders began to shake.

"You'll always be *filthy*," sneered Harriet. "Vox will never be able to wash away their touches because *you won't let him*."

Vox gathered Alastor into his arms and held him tightly to his chest. "That isn't true."

"It is. You know it is."

"Shut the fuck up," Vox snarled at Harriet. "First you berate him for offering himself to a man and now you're degrading him because he can't offer *all* of himself to a man? Make up your fucking mind, you bigoted bitch!"

Harriet reared backwards, face like thunder, and Vox bared his teeth at her in a vicious smile before wrapping himself around Alastor protectively and kissing his head.

“You’ll get there,” Vox whispered. “I have faith in you, Al. You’ve come so far already and if that’s what you want, we’ll work at it.”

Alastor blinked and leaned back, glancing at Vox in surprise.

“I’m not going to tell you you’re clean,” Vox murmured with a gentle frown. “Because I know you won’t believe me. So, if letting me have you like that is what you want, then we’ll work towards it at *your* pace. We’ll get there, Al, even if it takes a hundred years. Even if it takes *a thousand*. I’ll wash every last trace of them from you, I promise.”

Alastor’s heart fluttered and he lost his breath for a moment before clutching Vox’s collar and dragging him in for a frantic kiss. Vox’s soft skin was... strange, but by no means unpleasant, and Alastor lapped inside his mouth, whimpering when Vox curled around him possessively.

He belonged to Vox. Entirely to Vox. Vox would make him clean again. Alastor could finally stop worrying about not being able to give his lover *everything* because Vox had *promised* they would get there. Vox had promised to help him and Alastor trusted Vox’s word. One day, he would be able to give himself to Vox without fear.

When they parted for air, darkness surrounded them.

Alastor stared at Vox’s television-shaped head and realised his own tail was wiggling.

The closed gate appeared beside them and one of its stone pillars now bore two green lights whilst the other bore one.

Vox pressed a featherlight kiss to his ear. “Congratulations.”

Alastor grinned before his gaze softened. “...You followed me through the red door?”

Vox shrugged a shoulder. “Was about to go through the blue door but the red door didn’t disappear after you went through it, and I was worried about what you’d face after last time. I figured if there was anything I could do to help...”

“Thank you, Picturebox,” murmured Alastor. “It wasn’t *quite* what I was expecting, but I’m grateful you were there.”

“So am I,” said Vox quietly. “It taught me a bit more about you. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Alastor dropped his gaze in embarrassment. “Because I’m being ridiculous. I *know* I’m ‘clean’. I *know* I’ve come a long way from not even being able to hold your hand.”

“It isn’t ridiculous,” Vox said. “Knowing and feeling are different things.” He brushed his fingers down Alastor’s cheek. “We’ll get there. I promise.”

The corners of Alastor’s eyes crinkled with happiness and he pulsed a burst of playful static into Vox. “You didn’t tell me you used to be so handsome,” he teased.

Vox blinked and grinned. “Hey! Are you trying to say I’m not handsome now?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth, old pal!” Alastor chirped before plastering himself against Vox’s front. “I’m surprised you didn’t have more suitors begging for your attention.”

Vox chuckled and patted Alastor’s ass. “Oh yeah, sure. I was a real Adonis.”

Alastor’s grin wavered. “...You... You do understand how attractive you were, don’t you?”

Vox chuckled. “I think you may be a little biased, sweetheart.”

Alastor straightened. "...Vox, I mean it. You really were gorgeous."

Vox shook his head in amusement before beaming. "And you were shorter than I was expecting! The perfect size for me to hold, mind you. And if you think I was handsome, you should have looked in the mirror back there."

Alastor opened his mouth then closed it again before tilting his head to one side. "You don't believe me?"

Vox's smile faltered before he cast his gaze to the lone blue door. He looked back at Alastor with a renewed grin. "You going to follow me this time?"

Alastor let the subject drop. For now.

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Actually, I was thinking of staying here and letting you struggle through your trial alone."

"I see," Vox said solemnly. "Fuck you very much, sweetheart."

"Don't ask stupid questions, my love."

Vox laughed and tangled their fingers together before pushing through the blue door.

Doors.

It was a long corridor filled with hundreds of doors.

Each door looked like the one beside it, except for the small, metal number hanging upon it. Each door was made of cheap wood with even cheaper silver handles.

Vox frowned in confusion.

“Do you recognise this place?” Alastor asked.

Vox shook his head. “It’s nowhere I’ve been before.” He pulled a face. “Please tell me I’m not supposed to open all these doors? We’ll be here for *hours*. ”

Alastor shrugged and Vox sighed before trudging to door one and carefully opening it. It bore no lock or chain, so Vox stepped into the room curiously.

It was a bedroom he recognised - a bedroom that had belonged to a teenage girl he had grown close to in his human life.

They had both been seventeen when she had invited him up to her room, and Vox had seen it many times over the following year as he dated the girl. But then she cheated on him with one of the school’s star football players and it was terribly cliché and high school was fickle and shallow like that, but it had still broken Vox’s heart because she was the first girl he had ever slept with.

Nicole. Her name was Nicole. Vox’s chest ached at the memory.

There was a soft moan and Vox glanced at the bed, screen tinting red at the sight of his teenage self lapping enthusiastically at Nicole’s pussy.

He slammed the door shut, eyes wide.

Alastor tilted his head in query.

“Uh... Memory of an old girlfriend,” Vox said awkwardly before shuffling over to door two. “Let’s try a different door.”

Again, there was no lock to stop him from pushing into the room - albeit he was a little more hesitant this time. It was another girl’s bedroom - one he had only visited once, right after he had found out that Nicole had cheated on him.

“Harder.”

He glanced over at the bed, eyes blowing wide at the sight of himself in doggy-style with a girl he couldn’t even remember the name of anymore.

He grimaced and closed the door again.

Alastor stared at him expectantly.

“Uh... Rebound after the old girlfriend cheated on me,” muttered Vox.

Alastor’s gaze softened and Vox winced before heading for the third door.

He began to notice a pattern.

Behind each door was someone he had slept with, in chronological order from Nicole, leaving no one night-stand or unmemorable fling out. Every door hid another memory of sex; sometimes slow and tender, sometimes quick and rough. Some memories took place in bedrooms, others in offices or storage closets, and occasionally some were cloaked in the darkness of a narrow alleyway behind a seedy bar, or in a bathroom stall in dire need of cleaning. One had even taken place in the BDSM club he had visited.

Vox began to skip doors, ashamed by the things he saw despite the fact he had *lived* them, and it wasn't long before his human body was replaced by his demon body. He watched himself be invaded by tentacles, he watched himself take part in orgies, he watched himself be hit and whipped and pissed on as he begged to be fucked. He watched demons hurt him, he watched them break his screen and burn his vents, he watched himself sob and howl for more.

He watched himself be tied up and used as nothing more than a sex toy, he watched himself use others to satisfy his desperate need for touch, he watched his drunk ass get pinned against fences outside various bars as he was fucked non-too-gently. He watched himself fight another Overlord before the tension had them clawing at each other's naked bodies, writhing and moaning even as they continued to battle each other. He watched lovers snap his cables and rip out components as they had their way with him, and he watched some render him blind and deaf and mute as they fucked him until he bled.

He watched himself pretend to enjoy all of it.

He shut door number 247 and glanced down the corridor he had yet to explore. There were dozens of doors left.

He pressed his screen against the wood and trembled.

He was vile. Foul. No wonder his parents thought he was disgusting. He was *perverse*. All these people he had let touch him and hurt him and use him in such filthy ways. The things *he* had done to other people...

He was desperate and pathetic and his needs were *repulsive*.

Arms snaked around his middle and a warm body plastered itself against his back.

Vox flinched. "How can you stand to touch me?"

He knew Alastor had caught glimpses of what was behind some of the doors. He knew Alastor had heard some of the filth he had taken part in.

“Because I love you,” Alastor said simply into the back of his neck. “Because you’re mine. Because none of this changes how I feel about you.”

“It should,” muttered Vox, stomach rolling with nausea.

“It doesn’t,” Alastor said firmly before kissing the back of his neck.

Vox shied away from him and slipped out of his hold, ignoring Alastor’s unhappy frown as he forced himself to continue through the rest of the doors, skipping more and more as his nausea increased and his chest grew heavy with disdain at himself.

He opened the penultimate door and his breath hitched at the sight of him and Valentino, both of them furious and hissing quiet words at each other as they fucked against the desk in Vox’s office. They were both bruised and their claws bit into each other’s skin and they were clearly determined to hurt one another if the various bloody wounds were anything to go by, yet they continued to wrestle for dominance over one another, and Vox flinched as he watched himself shock Valentino and flip their positions, smashing the moth-demon’s already-battered face against the desk as he slammed ruthlessly into his ass.

Vox closed the door tiredly and eyed the final door. 312.

Unlike the other doors, this one was at the end of the corridor rather than at its sides. It also bore a small lock beneath the handle and its wood seemed a little thicker and darker. Vox pushed the handle and frowned when it wouldn’t open.

“Vox,” Alastor said softly as he reached for Vox’s chest.

Vox retreated from his touch but his back hit the door of 311 and Alastor’s fingers closed around a golden chain that had appeared around his neck. There was a key attached to it,

lying exactly where Vox's heart was.

Vox blinked at the key and tried to remove the chain but found that it had no clasp and it was too tight to slide over his head.

He crouched awkwardly and inserted the key into the lock, but when he pushed the door, a chain prevented it from opening more than a crack.

Vox peered into the room.

And felt nauseous at the sight of his and Alastor's first time together.

He slammed the door shut and put his head in his hands as he slid onto the floor. After a moment, Alastor joined him on the floor, slipping an arm around his shoulders.

"Three-hundred and twelve," Vox whispered. "You're the three-hundred and twelfth person I've slept with." Maybe more. Some of those rooms had contained orgies and threesomes and-

"Shit. You're just another fucking door," Vox whimpered as tears dripped down his screen. He pulled his knees to his chest. "I'm a filthy slut. How can you touch me after seeing all that? After knowing what I did? After knowing what I let people do to me? What I *begged* them to do to me..." He shrank away from Alastor. "You must feel sick. You must be *disgusted* thinking about all the times I touched you after knowing where my fingers and tongue and every fucking part of me has been."

He trembled and a choked sob left his throat. He clutched at his head. "Fuck, you're just another door," he said hysterically. "I don't want you to be another door! I... I wanted you to be- You were supposed to be *different*. I'm supposed to *love* you and yet you're at the end of this *fucking corridor*! Another fucking notch in my splintering bedpost!"

More tears streaked down his screen and he pressed his palms against his face. “You deserve so much more than this. Than *me*.”

His breath hitched when Alastor growled and swung into his lap, tearing his hands away from his screen and pinning them against door 312.

“You are what I want,” Alastor said lowly. “You are what I deserve. I don’t care who you’ve been with before. I don’t care what you did with them. I care about making sure everyone knows that you’re mine now. I care about pleasing you. I care about what *you* want and need and *deserve*.”

Vox swallowed. “Alastor... I’m foul-”

“You’re perfect,” Alastor hissed. “I don’t care how many people you’ve slept with, Vox. I *want* you. I want to be with you. I want to be a ‘notch in your bedpost’ - the final notch. The biggest notch. The only notch that matters. The one that breaks the damn bed.”

Vox blinked and Alastor released his wrists in favour of pushing his shoulders against the door as he pulsed wave after wave of comforting, possessive, *seductive* static through Vox.

Alastor mouthed wet kisses against his neck. “You’ve missed the very important fact that *my* door is at the end of the corridor,” he purred. “No doors can come after it and the corridor can’t be extended. I’m the *final* door.”

Vox fell silent, heart racing as Alastor’s fingers curled around the chain at his neck. “*And*, unlike the others, my door was *locked*. It could only be opened with the key overlying your heart and you can’t remove the chain it’s attached to.” Alastor smirked and nipped at his neck. “You can’t even enter through the door because it’s chained from the inside.”

Vox slowly slid his hands around Alastor’s hips.

“The person behind this door is *precious* to you,” Alastor whispered as he peppered kisses along the edge of Vox’s screen. “You’ve locked it to protect those memories, and you keep the key close to your heart. You won’t let anyone see into that room because the things inside it are *valuable*. You want to protect them.” Alastor pulled back, smirking smugly. “The things behind the other doors don’t matter. They aren’t worth as much.”

A smile slowly pulled at Vox’s lips as he tightened his grip on Alastor’s hips.

“Now, don’t get me wrong, I would’ve expected a bit more security than a simple lock and chain considering how *important* I am to you,” drawled Alastor as he caught the bottom of Vox’s screen. “Because I am your *favourite* lover, aren’t I, dear?”

Vox nodded quickly.

Alastor’s smirk widened. “And I am the *best*, aren’t I?”

Again, Vox nodded eagerly, tugging Alastor flush against him and stealing a heated kiss.

“And I mean more to you than all of these doors combined, right?” Alastor purred as he increased the intensity of his static, sliding his natural frequency against Vox’s in a manner that set every one of Vox’s nerves alight with desire and *need*.

“Yes,” Vox choked, tangling a hand in Alastor’s hair as the other curled around his slim waist. “*Fuck, yes*. You mean *everything* to me, Al.”

Alastor chuckled and drew Vox into a slow, filthy, open-mouthed kiss.

“Then make that fucking door more worthy of me,” he growled against Vox’s lips.

Vox slammed a palm against the door blindly, gasping when Alastor grabbed him by his shirt, dragged him to his feet, and pinned him against it as he ravished his mouth.

There was a heavy *clunk* and a creak and a whirring noise and Vox's back felt very cold all of a sudden.

Alastor leaned back and raked his gaze over the door with a smirk. "Better," he purred and he released Vox just enough to let him twist his head.

Alastor had him pinned against an enormous bank vault with fingerprint authorisation, retinal scanning, and voice authentication. Beside the iron door was a pin code keypad.

Vox barked out a laugh and turned back to Alastor with a grin. "Is that worthy of you, darling?"

Alastor blinked slowly like a smug cat. "It's... acceptable."

Vox melted as Alastor kissed him deeply. When they parted, Alastor smiled warmly at him. "I don't care how many people you've slept with, Vox. I'm upset at what they did to you, at what you felt they needed to do to you just so they would touch you willingly. I'm upset you suffered so much pain through something that's supposed to bring two people closer together, or at the very least, bring people *pleasure*."

He frowned. "But don't you *ever* think I'm disgusted by you. Don't you ever think I'll shy away from your touch because of how others have treated you. I love you, my dear. And I want to give you everything those three-hundred and eleven doors failed to."

Vox's fans flipped on, screen burning red.

Alastor didn't think him vile or repulsive.

Alastor thought him *worthy* of gentleness and love.

Alastor *wanted* him, even after seeing everything he'd done, *everyone* he'd done.

Vox drew Alastor against his chest, pulling him into a tender embrace.

He would never face that pain and humiliation again. Alastor would take care of him, love him the way he'd always craved. He would never be sexually abused again.

A relieved sob choked out of him as he squeezed Alastor tighter. "Thank you," he whispered.

The corridor melted away as Alastor squeezed him adoringly.

"You deserve it," Alastor murmured as he pulled away slowly to smile at Vox.

Vox's pulse raced, chest warm and gooey. He could *feel* parts of himself sealing back together, pieces that had been broken long before he met Alastor knitting closed for the first time.

He laughed wetly and bumped their heads together, pulsing a burst of grateful static between them as a green light appeared on the second gate pillar.

A bell tolled and the gates opened.

"Four to go," breathed Alastor as he nuzzled Vox's screen.

Vox closed his eyes and exhaled shakily. "Four to go."

They held each other a little longer.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Some homophobic slurs in the first section

More of their human selves to come... ;)

Chapter 56: Pain - Pt. I

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“You look tired.”

Vox glowered at the darkness as he petted Alastor’s ears and received gentle kisses to his neck in return. They bathed each other in reassuring static, drawing strength from one another’s affection whilst they could. They had yet to step through the gates.

“There’s no need to continue. You could rest here, for all eternity,” continued the breathy voice.

“One minute,” Vox growled. “Give us one minute and we’ll walk through the gates.” His eyes fluttered closed when Alastor drew a finger down his damaged antenna.

“Lucifer will attempt to save his daughter regardless of whether you complete the trials. Rest. You’ve earned it.”

“So you can feed off our misery for longer?” Alastor huffed. “No, we’ll continue.” He leaned back to narrow his eyes at the darkness and Vox took the opportunity to whirl him around and pull Alastor’s back flush with his chest as he snaked his arms tightly around the Radio Demon and mouthed kisses into the back of his neck. Alastor’s fingers slotted between his and he made a soft sound of approval.

They needed this. Something to keep them both going through whatever trauma they were about to face. They didn’t even know if they would stay together or if they would be separated, like in the first trial.

“You have no idea of the suffering that awaits you.”

Vox squeezed Alastor tighter and Alastor tipped his head to one side, revealing the hickey Vox had given him earlier. Vox kissed it tenderly and Alastor pressed back into his body with a soft sigh.

“We can handle it,” Vox growled before he nipped at the bruise, earning himself a quiet moan of pleasure. He slid his hands under Alastor’s shirt, fingers splaying over warm, scarred skin. “But first, I’m going to take care of you, sweetheart,” Vox murmured to his lover.

Alastor raised a hand to the back of Vox’s head, toying with his ports, and Vox hummed in approval and smoothed his palms over Alastor’s skin, nuzzling and kissing the bruise at his neck.

“One of you will die here.”

Vox froze, fear gripping his chest at breakneck speed. For a moment, he couldn’t breathe and he tugged Alastor tighter against him.

Alastor’s ears lowered. “She’s lying,” he murmured. “This is what she does, my dear. Ignore her.”

A soft chuckle. “Are you sure, little fawn? You forget I know everything about both of you - your souls are *mine*. I see *everything* you fight to keep hidden.” A playful breeze chilled their skin. “One of you isn’t as strong as the other. One of you won’t reach the end.”

Vox’s breath hitched, fans whirring faster. It was him. It had to be him. He hadn’t even been able to beat one trial on his own, but Alastor... Alastor had beaten *three*.

He felt sick. He was going to die.

He was supposed to be happy. He was supposed to live a happy afterlife with Alastor.

Shit. He didn't want to die. He'd only just found something good with Alastor, and now-

"Vox, breathe," Alastor murmured, cupping the sides of his screen as he pressed their chests flush and leaned their heads together. "She's *lying*. She feeds off your fear and pain and anger, and her influence is stronger here. *Breathe*. Neither of us will die. Neither of us will leave the other."

Vox blinked and stared at Alastor and suddenly felt very cold and drained. He shivered and pressed closer to Alastor, seeking warmth.

Alastor rubbed his arms to warm him up, tucking him against his chest as he shivered.

There was another chuckle, this one darker than the last. "Emotive, isn't he?" she purred and Alastor didn't grace her with a response. "Your fear is delicious, sweet picturebox."

"We'll get through this. Together," Alastor whispered. "We'll save Charlie, and Lucifer will have an army of Archangels ready to detain Roo the moment she steps out of Purgatory. We'll beat this, Vox. I promise."

An indescribable feeling of dread clawed up Vox's throat. "...What if Charlie's already dead?"

"She won't be."

"She *lies*," Vox insisted. "What if... What if we do all this and she's not even *alive*?" His eyes widened as another thought hit him. "Alastor, what if we do all this and she just kills us? What's stopping her? Once we've beaten the trials and freed her, what if she kills us before she leaves Purgatory? We'll no longer be of any use to her."

Alastor hesitated, mouth opening and closing for a moment before he shook his head. “She owns our souls. We have *some* use to her.”

Vox shook his head frantically, voice a mere whisper. “Al, something isn’t right about this. She said Val would own my soul once we beat the trials, but after *everything* we’ve faced, after the way she’s gone to such lengths to trick and manipulate us... why would she just... *give* my soul to him?” He swallowed thickly, eyes blowing wide. “...I don’t think we’re getting out of here. I think she’s going to destroy us.”

Alastor paused as Vox gripped him tighter, anxiety and fear overwhelming him as Roo began to laugh, low and unnerving.

Finally, Alastor tucked Vox’s screen under his chin and curled over him protectively.

“She’s feeding off you, my love. Stop thinking. Stop panicking. *This* is why no one completes the trials. She gets greedy and she makes you feel all of this *despair* until you can no longer continue.” Alastor squeezed him tighter. “But we aren’t going to fall into her trap, are we? We’re going to keep pushing forwards, even if it means we have to *drag* each other to the end.”

Vox trembled and shook, clutching at Alastor’s warmth. He was *so cold*.

“You’ll be dragging a *corpse*,” purred Roo and Alastor bared his teeth before rubbing Vox’s back.

“I need you to pull yourself together and stand tall,” Alastor whispered. “I can’t do this without you, Vox. I *need* you.”

“I’m not as strong as you,” whimpered Vox. He felt as though he were drowning in the darkness and the cold. He couldn’t do this. He was going to die. *Roo said he was going to die.*

He was crying, he realised, body shaking violently as his heart raced and his breaths came quick and shallow and *fuck, he was going to die in the dark, cold and alone and his efforts would be meaningless because Charlie was already dead and his soul would belong to Valentino soon and Alastor would have to face Roo alone because he would be dragging Vox's corpse-*

“Tell me what you see,” Alastor murmured.

“Darkness,” whined Vox.

“Open your eyes and tell me what you see,” Alastor whispered, firmer this time.

Vox opened his eyes slowly. “...You. Just you, surrounded by an endless void.”

Alastor drew soothing patterns over his back. “Tell me what you smell.”

Vox licked his lips. “...Uh, musk. Forests. Rainfall. You. I can smell you.”

His heart rate began to slow.

“What can you hear?”

Vox swallowed. “Nothing. Silence. There's... There's nothing.”

Alastor shook his head and tapped Vox's chest. “What can you *hear*?”

“...My electronics?” Vox said slowly, concentrating on the gentle hum. “And... uh... your voice. And *my* voice. And my fans.”

Alastor hummed and tipped forwards, capturing Vox’s lips in a slow, passionate kiss. He pulled back with a lazy smile. “What can you taste?”

Vox stared at him with wide eyes, screen growing red. “Your mouth. Your tongue.”

Alastor smirked, watching Vox through half-lidded eyes. “And how do I taste?”

“Amazing,” Vox breathed. “Can’t get enough of you. You’re perfect. I’m fucking *starving* for you.” He surged forwards and Alastor hummed in amusement as Vox stole another heated kiss from him.

“What can you feel?” Alastor murmured against his lips before nipping at his lower one and curling a possessive hand around the back of his neck as he pushed into Vox’s body.

Vox clung to him. “You,” he growled. “I can feel your heat and your long fingers and your gorgeous body against mine and your teeth biting my lip and your tongue in my mouth and, *fuck-*”

He tangled his fingers in Alastor’s hair, cupped a hand beneath his ass, and kissed him ruthlessly as he hoisted the Radio Demon onto his hips. “Want to fucking *feel* you,” he hissed as Alastor wrapped his legs around his waist and let Vox ruin his mouth as he pressed his fingers into Vox’s ports and clutched possessively at his back.

Finally, Vox smiled, looking up at Alastor fondly. “Thanks.”

Alastor poked an antenna. “You’re welcome, darling. Are you feeling better now?”

Vox nodded. He was warmer and more grounded. He eased Alastor to his feet again, gasping when Alastor gripped the bottom of his screen with narrowed eyes.

“Next time I ask you what you can feel, my lips will be wrapped around your *cock*, understand?”

Vox’s mouth went dry. “Can you ask me soon?”

Alastor smiled sweetly, pecked his screen, and suddenly scowled into the darkness.

“I want proof that Charlie is alive. I want to see her.”

It took Vox a moment to switch his brain into gear and when he did, he frowned and rubbed Alastor’s back protectively.

“She’s alive,” Roo said.

“Not good enough,” Alastor growled. “If you want us to free you, you’ll prove to us that Charlie is alive.”

“Demanding little thing, aren’t you? That’s not how this works.”

“That’s how it’s going to work,” Alastor hissed as his antlers grew an inch taller. “Show us Charlie or rot in here with the rest of your *corpses*.”

“You *insolent* little-”

The chain around Alastor’s throat shimmered into view and Alastor gasped and clutched at it as it tightened. Vox quickly grasped the chain where it faded into the surrounding darkness,

tugging harshly at it to give Alastor some slack, some room to *breathe*.

One of the links bent beneath his fingers.

Vox froze for half a second before he inhaled sharply and *pulled*, but the chain was already dissolving beneath his fingers and he stared at his empty hand in shock.

Alastor sucked in a few gulps of air before looking at Vox in query.

Before Vox could explain, his gaze caught on a body slumped on the floor behind Alastor.
“Charlie!”

Alastor whirled around and darted towards her, and she opened her eyes sluggishly before reaching out to him and grimacing. Her face was bruised and her shirt was spattered with blood and one of her horns were broken. Before Alastor could kneel beside her, she vanished.

Alastor stared at the empty space she had just occupied before he clenched his fists and twisted into a more monstrous form.

“What have you done to her?” he snarled, radio filters thick in his voice, and Roo’s reply was cold and devoid of her earlier teasing.

“Complete the trials.”

A bell tolled, startling Vox, and Alastor growled animalistically before shrinking back to his usual size.

“The chain bent,” Vox blurted.

Alastor looked at him in confusion.

“Your chain,” Vox said quickly. “When I pulled it, one of the links *bent*. Alastor, I think... When we’re in Hell, they act like regular soul bindings, but here... They’re *weak*. The rules of Purgatory are different. I think while we’re here, we can break them.”

Alastor’s eyes widened and he touched his throat before he glanced over at the gates. He looked back at Vox and held his hand out and Vox took it without hesitation.

They marched through the gates and grimaced at the sharp sting blossoming across their wrists.

Pain.

Vox looked to Alastor and his heart sank when he realised that he was alone.

Shit.

With a sigh, Vox wandered through the darkness for a while, searching for Alastor, or for anything really - anything that wasn’t the void of nothingness.

He startled when a few dozen spotlights flashed to life in front of him, illuminating a path for him to walk down. Vox scowled before hesitantly stepping between the two rows of spotlights and as he passed the first light on the left, an image of himself and Alastor appeared beneath it.

The only sound was that of Vox’s echoing footsteps - which hadn’t been echoing moments ago - and Vox watched the flickering image of himself grab Alastor in the middle of a nameless street in Pentagram City and pour thousands of volts into him. Alastor’s face contorted with agony as he pushed Vox away, but Vox grabbed him again and repeated the trick.

The picture melted away, like burning film in a projector, and Vox was left staring at an empty space illuminated by a spotlight.

He glanced down the path uneasily and restarted his journey, and this time, a silent film started on the right of the path - another moment from his and Alastor's past.

Vox remembered this. This was when he had asked Alastor for help with gaining the royal family's trust - the moment he had asked Alastor to 'join his team'. He grimaced as he punched Alastor square in the mouth before laying into him furiously with his fists, and it wasn't long before a scrap broke out between them. Vox winced at the sight of Alastor's blood-streaked face and tattered clothes and the desperation in his gaze as he wrapped his hands around Vox's throat to stop his attack.

The film flickered and faded and Vox took a moment to compose himself, to soothe the ache in his heart.

Things were different now. There had been so many misunderstandings between them back then, so much anger and fear. They were better now. *Stronger*. There were no secrets between them. No lies. They were healing each other.

He moved on, frowning as the next sequence played on the left - a burned and blistered Alastor looking sadly at the desk in Vox's office before Vox slammed him against it and plunged a shard of glass straight into his *eye*.

Alastor's agonised howl tore through the silence and Vox skittered away with a wide gaze and a racing heart, but when he stepped off the path, his shoe landed in something sticky and he glanced down to see blood creeping towards the path, Alastor's limp body half-observed by darkness and his eye-less face twisted with pain and dripping with blood and-

Vox quickly stepped onto the path again, squeezing his eyes shut.

It wasn't real.

Alastor was *fine*.

He pushed onward.

More snapshots of his past played as he walked; fights between himself and Alastor as the years passed, each one depicting moments where Vox had wounded Alastor - some more severely than others. Vox tried to keep to the path, because whenever he strayed from it, he would see a haunting version of Alastor - missing limbs or skin or his soft ears or with his bones broken or his guts spilled over the floor - another Alastor that *could* have been if Vox had fully given in to his anger and grief.

By the end of the path, Vox was clutching his chest as his breaths came harder than usual. He closed his eyes, taking a few seconds to steady himself, and when he opened his eyes, there was another floating projection ahead of him, this one of a more recent memory.

The day they had danced along the canal, after Vox had revealed that he had kept the torn photograph of Alastor. Vox watched in confusion as Alastor straddled him with an adoring smile on Vox's bed in V-Tower. He watched them touch each other, explore each other's bodies, and he didn't understand because this was a *happy* memory.

But then, Alastor's expression grew hesitant and he tried to pull away from Vox, but Vox tightened his grip on Alastor's hips and deliberately slipped his hand beneath his underwear and yanked on his tail, and panic swept over Alastor's features as Vox continued to smirk.

"*Red*," Alastor choked out, but Vox ignored him and continued to pull his tail and smack his ass and- no, that hadn't happened! Alastor had called *red* that day, but not like that! Vox hadn't ignored his hesitancy or his fear...

...Had he?

Had Alastor given signs that day and Vox had somehow missed them? Too enraptured by Alastor's body?

The sequence rolled on, moving through other times Alastor had called *yellow* or *red*, and each time, Vox watched himself *push* Alastor into the situation, watched himself ignore the warning signs of Alastor's discomfort, watched himself lead Alastor into a situation that caused fear and anxiety until the Radio Demon was forced to pull away or was thrown into a traumatic flashback from his past.

The film continued into the first time Alastor had seen Vox's dick, the first time Vox had stroked them together, the first time they had truly had sex.

However, instead of comfortable curiosity and an easy smile, Alastor looked *nervous*. He glanced at Vox anxiously and shook his head, ears low, but Vox merely smirked and ground harder against him, and Alastor's eyes filled with fear.

Then, Vox chuckled and revealed some chocolate-flavoured lube, which he smeared over Alastor's asshole, and the Radio Demon tensed, eyes wide and panicked as Vox sucked greedily at his dick and thrust two fingers inside him-

"No!" Vox snarled. "That isn't what happened! He was enjoying it! It was just the end - he... he was reminded of the night he was..." Vox trailed off, gaze trailing slowly to the images as they continued, each showing how uncomfortable Alastor was at Vox's touch even as Vox *forced* him to tolerate it.

Had Vox... *convinced* himself that Alastor enjoyed exploring sexual intimacy with him when in actual fact, he loathed it? Had Alastor enjoyed any of what they had done? It was difficult to remember...

He flinched at the sight of himself coming on an ashamed and fearful Alastor, pinning him down as the Radio Demon's ears flattened against his skull.

He couldn't have done that to Alastor, could he? He would have *noticed*. He wouldn't have become so carried away that he *hurt* Alastor like that, forced him to relive his trauma...

What if he *hadn't* noticed?

His pulse quickened and his face glitched as his fans worked faster.

No, he would have noticed Alastor's distress.

Wouldn't he?

What if Alastor was hiding it to cater to *his* desire for touch? What if these sequences were how Alastor had *really* felt in those moments?

He retreated a step and bumped into something solid, and he whirled around to see a naked Alastor, covered in deep bloody wounds and re-opened scars, one eye missing as he hid his genitals behind cupped hands. His ears were pinned to his skull and his lips were bruised and raw and he trembled as he stared at Vox with a haunted expression.

"Help me," he whimpered.

Bile crawled up Vox's throat and he backed away from this fake Alastor, shaking his head and holding a hand out in front of him when Alastor staggered after him, tears filling his remaining eye.

"Vox," he whispered, anguished. "Help me, *please*. Everything *hurts*."

His filters were off and Vox couldn't *breathe* as he stumbled backwards.

"I'll let you fuck me however you want, but please, Picturebox. Please help me. Look how you've hurt me."

Ice settled in Vox's veins when Alastor dropped to his knees in front of him, fingers hooking around the backs of his thighs as he looked up hopefully, *pleadingly*.

"You can use me however you like," he whispered. "As long as you *heal* me. I *need* you, Vox. I need you to fix me. You always know how to fix me. You make me happy. I love you, Vox. I'll always love you."

It was *wrong* seeing Alastor so beaten and bloody and *kneeling* before Vox, offering himself up like a victim of domestic abuse - a victim determined to do *anything* to stop the pain, to avoid the next round of violence.

Alastor unzipped Vox's trousers and Vox shoved him away quickly, breath catching at Alastor's pained whimper.

"You're not him," Vox whispered. "This is a trick. Part of the trial. This isn't you."

"I am what you made me," Alastor breathed. "I'm everything you've done to me these past decades. Look at me, Vox. Look how you've hurt me. Look how you've broken me."

Vox squeezed his eyes shut but Alastor suddenly cried out in agony and Vox felt something warm and sticky between his fingers.

He looked down to see his claws impaling a pulsing heart and he watched Alastor weep at his feet, clutching the gaping wound in his chest. Alastor stared up at him as he trembled.

"You didn't believe me when I told you she was possessing me. You *punished* me for being tortured by her. You abandoned me and ripped out my heart."

Vox began to shake.

“How could you do this to me?” Alastor whimpered. “I love you! I love you and look what you’ve done to me!”

Vox looked at the oozing gashes and the dripping eye socket and the torn ears and huge hole in his chest.

He vomited.

“You can fuck me if you want,” Alastor whined. “I’ll do anything to make you stop hurting me. I just want you to love me the way I love you...”

The heart pulsed and spurted thick, dark blood in Vox’s palm as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He glanced at the heart in horror and dropped it and it tore with a thick *squelch* as it fell.

Alastor *wailed*, clutching harder at his open chest as he surged forwards and caught the torn lump of muscle. He tried to offer it to Vox again, crying harder. “No, please. Please, Vox. Don’t leave me. *Please*. Don’t do this.”

“You’re not my Alastor,” Vox snapped and the heart tore further and Alastor arched with a cry of pain as a new gash opened up on his back.

Vox stilled.

Alastor offered the heart to Vox again. “Take it. Please. I love you.”

Vox stared at the damaged, pulsing heart uncomfortably. “You aren’t him. He doesn’t look like you. He doesn’t sound like you. I won’t be tricked into feeling sorry for you, into thinking I’ve *forced* him to be intimate when I *know* he wanted it.”

“Whatever you say,” Alastor said desperately. “I’ll like anything if it means you’ll take care of me, take care of my heart.” He offered the heart towards Vox again and Vox grimaced.

“Get away from me.” He turned away, searching desperately through the darkness for *his* Alastor. He needed to make sure he was okay. He needed to make sure that his skin was intact and his eyes were bright and his chest didn’t have a huge gaping hole in it.

The creature behind him cried out and collapsed onto the floor and Vox glanced back to see more wounds opening up over its skin as it curled protectively over the massacred lump of muscle in its hands, which no longer resembled a heart.

Vox’s chest ached as he watched the creature shiver.

He sighed and kneeled beside the fake Alastor and took off his coat before draping it around the creature’s shoulders to offer it some privacy.

It *howled*.

Vox yanked his coat from its body, gasping at the fresh burns painting its back.

“Why?” it wailed in Alastor’s unfiltered voice. “Why do you keep punishing me? I *love* you. I just want to make you happy.”

“I-” Vox glanced between the coat and the creature’s blistered skin. At *Alastor’s* blistered skin. “I was trying to help.”

“Help?” Alastor hissed, suddenly angry as he gripped Vox’s wrist painfully tight. “You’ve *destroyed* me, Vox. You’ve put me through unimaginable pain and torture. Wounds may heal, but I’ll never forget how it felt when you *inflicted* them upon me. Never underestimate a smile - you never quite know what’s hiding underneath.”

Vox froze, staring at Alastor in shock before he attempted to tear out of his grip, but Alastor held fast, grinning grotesquely. “How can you live with yourself, knowing the suffering you’ve put him through?”

Vox swallowed and shook his head. “He’s forgiven me. We... We’re stronger. We take care of each other.”

“You force him to *pleasure* you because of your own pathetic insecurities,” Alastor said as his neck cracked and his frame grew into something more demonic.

“That’s not true,” Vox said quietly, uncertainly. “He enjoys it.”

“Does he really?” Alastor purred. “Or is he just being polite? Is he humouring you because he knows you crave touch so desperately? Perhaps he hates it.”

His wounds bled into a puddle on the floor of darkness.

Vox attempted to free himself once more, but he yelped when Alastor let out a haunting laugh and pinned him down, wounds dripping onto Vox’s frame. The massacred heart had somehow returned to Alastor’s open chest, pulsating and writhing as though it had a mind of its own. Vox felt sick.

“How can he ever trust you? How can he ever truly forgive you after everything you’ve done to him? You do nothing but *hurt him*.”

Vox choked when Alastor’s long claws wrapped around his throat. He scrambled at his arm, clawing and kicking out, and he lost his breath when his fingers easily peeled away the skin and muscle of Alastor’s forearm, stripping it to the bone as Alastor laughed hysterically.

“See?” Alastor crowed triumphantly. “You will *always* hurt him.” His claws squeezed Vox’s neck tighter.

“No!” Vox whimpered. “No, I won’t! He wouldn’t love me so deeply if I did! He wouldn’t fight so hard to get back to me! He wouldn’t feel *safe* around me! He wouldn’t leave himself so fucking vulnerable around me if he thought I would hurt him!” Vox scowled up at the distorted Alastor. “The only person who’s *actually* afraid of me hurting him is-”

He cut himself off, eyes wide.

Alastor’s twisted grin grew, practically splitting his face in half.

“Me,” Vox whispered. “*I’m* afraid of...” He stared at the mauled Alastor for a long moment before he gingerly lifted a hand to his ruined heart and scooped it from his chest.

Alastor’s fingers slid away from his throat as Vox cradled the mess of muscle close to his chest and concentrated on it. He brushed his fingers over the bloody tissue and watched as it knitted itself back together.

He swallowed thickly and looked up at the grinning thing above him.

“You’re not him,” Vox whispered. “You’re *me*. You’re all the things I can’t forgive myself for.”

The creature laughed electronically and when it next smiled at Vox, it looked like the Television Demon.

Vox gasped as the creature stabbed cyan claws through the newly healed heart, tearing it open as though it was made of paper.

He tugged the heart against his chest, curling his fingers around it protectively and it healed once more.

The creature above him laughed and swiped at the heart again, but Vox tucked it against his body with a snarl.

“I won’t let you hurt him!” Vox hissed before he blinked at the creature that looked like him and slowly lowered his gaze to the beating heart in his hands.

“...Except, you’re *me*,” Vox muttered to himself. “You’re all of my insecurities and my fears and everything *bad* I see in myself.”

The creature smirked and reached for the heart again, and Vox gripped its wrist with a scowl. “You’re the version of me that I’m afraid I *am*.” His gaze softened a fraction. “But you’re not the one Alastor sees. You’re not the one I’ve become. You’re just sad and scared and angry at the past.”

Vox’s brows drew together as he laid a hand on the creature’s shoulder. “...And I forgive you.”

The creature blinked and straightened.

“I forgive you,” Vox said again, firmer, as he caught the bottom of its screen between a finger and thumb. “I forgive you for hurting Alastor, for hurting *yourself*. I forgive you for being scared and angry and miserable after everything that happened.”

The creature’s expression distorted into one of fury. “We don’t deserve forgiveness! We deserve pain and suffering!”

Vox shook his head slowly. “No. No, we don’t.” He offered the creature a small smile. “We’ve been through enough pain and suffering. We deserve something *good*. Something that makes us *happy* for once.”

“We have put Alastor through agony and torment!”

“And I forgive us,” Vox said gently. “Just as he forgives us. This fear, this *guilt*... it isn’t helping us. Holding onto it will actively hinder our relationship with Alastor. It’s time to *move on*. To stop being controlled by our past and make new and better memories.”

The creature hesitated before sitting back on its haunches and frowning at Vox. Vox exhaled heavily before carefully offering the heart to the other version of himself. “It’s our job to take care of this. Alastor gave it to us because he thinks we’ll be able to keep it safe. It’s time we start trusting ourselves as much as he trusts us.” He pressed the pulsing organ into the creature’s hands and it took it, surprised, before it shifted shapes again, taking on the form of a hopeful, battered Alastor.

Vox smiled warmly and reached out to pet a torn ear, grinning when Alastor’s skin began drawing together again, his wounds healing from his ear down to his hooves.

Alastor closed his eyes and leaned into Vox’s palm with a smile.

“You’re safe with me,” Vox whispered. “I promise I’ll keep you safe. No more pain. No more trauma. We can fix each other’s broken parts.” He brushed Alastor’s hair from his face. “We can’t change the past, so there’s no use in hanging on to it. I get that now.”

Alastor cracked an eye open, grinning proudly before he faded away, leaving Vox alone.

Something in Vox’s chest lifted and he stood with a smile. He rolled his shoulders and wandered further through the darkness, searching for Alastor or the gates or anything that wasn’t endless void.

There was a deep, unnerving growl and Vox tensed and whirled around, stomach dropping in a way that he couldn’t explain.

Nothing.

He frowned and continued his journey through the darkness.

“Stop! Please stop, Alastor!”

Vox startled at the sound of his own voice and he glanced to the right to see a flash of blue and red. He headed towards the figures, gasping at the sight of Alastor - face streaked with tears and eyes wide and traumatised - clawing and kicking and punching at a bruised and bloodied Vox with a smashed screen.

As Vox edged closer, the darkness was chased away by the dim lights of a familiar street in Pentagram City.

Bile crept into his throat. This was the street Alastor’s shadow had attacked him in that first time, all those decades ago.

He heard himself sobbing as he put out weak arms to defend himself, but Alastor kept up his assault, seemingly unable to stop, and he watched in horror as Alastor tore his heart out and crushed it beneath his claws, killing him.

The loop restarted and Alastor stalked towards another Vox who was crawling across the floor away from him, begging him to leave him alone, to not hurt him, and again Alastor pinned him to the road and laid into him viciously.

His skin and clothes were drenched with blood and coolant and he seemed unable to speak as more tears fell down his face. His strikes were mechanical and rehearsed, almost as though he was being puppeted and Vox winced as the other version of himself let out an agonised scream before Alastor ripped out his vocoder and began tearing the wires inside his vents.

Alastor put a hoof through Vox’s screen and snapped an antenna as Vox struggled to get away, refusing to fight back, and Alastor’s eyes switched to dials, antlers growing as he summoned three shadows and began pulling Vox’s limbs off his body like he was a doll.

When that Vox died in a pool of his own blood, another one appeared, begging and whimpering and Alastor found new ways to torture him.

Vox stared at the scene, stomach rolling violently. “Alastor,” Vox called. “Stop.”

Alastor turned wide eyes upon him, smile painfully tight, and he swiftly killed the other Vox by strangling him before stalking towards the real Vox.

“Al, it’s me,” Vox said gently as he tried to find a harmony for Alastor’s erratic frequency. “I’m real. I’ve come to help.”

Alastor prowled towards him, claws extended and blood dripping from his antlers.

Vox frowned uneasily. “It’s really me. Tell me how to help.”

Alastor’s eyes were far too wide and his ears were flat. The stitches at his lips shimmered into view as he drew back his fist.

Vox’s breath hitched. “Alastor, stop!”

He threw out a hand to catch Alastor’s fist but Alastor’s other claws sunk into his side and Vox hissed before lurching away from him. Alastor snagged his coat and rammed his antlers through Vox’s screen.

Vox whined as his vision distorted, face flickering as cracks spider webbed across his screen.

The street warped into Alastor’s old hallway and Alastor wrapped a hand around his throat. Vox tugged at it as he choked.

“Alastor, please!”

Alastor stared at him with an unsettling grin as he untucked Vox’s shirt and began raking his claws through scarred skin. His cheeks were wet with tears.

Through the pain, Vox finally realised that Alastor *couldn’t* stop. He was being controlled, puppeted like the night he had led Vox to the bookshop, and forced to wear a grin as he killed Vox over and over.

Vox was tossed onto the floor and Alastor stamped a hoof onto his stomach before straddling him when Vox doubled over with agony. He crushed Vox’s fingers beneath a hoof, breaking them in one blow.

Vox howled and Alastor’s trembling grew more violent.

Vox clenched his teeth through the pain and placed his intact hand against Alastor’s chest when the Radio Demon knelt above him. Alastor suddenly bit into the flesh on the underside of his arm and Vox hissed and watched in horror as the major vein was sliced. Alastor dropped his arm carelessly as blood poured from the severed vessel.

“I know this isn’t you,” Vox whispered and Alastor stared at him with his wide, traumatised eyes as he ripped Vox’s clothes off and began clawing at his skin.

“You wouldn’t do this to me,” Vox continued, whining when Alastor licked up his chest and bit hard into the thick scar at his shoulder, where Valentino had dismembered him. Alastor tore a chunk of flesh away and ate it, looking nauseous as he swallowed.

Vox’s body *burned*. He managed to lift his bloodied arm and splayed his hand over Alastor’s spine. “Come back to me, sweetheart,” he whispered, beginning to feel rather light-headed.

Alastor’s shaking worsened and he sunk his claws into Vox’s soft stomach, carving pieces of flesh and muscle out of him until he had access to Vox’s biological organs.

“You can fight this,” Vox whimpered through gritted teeth. “I know you can.”

Alastor’s fingers closed around his right kidney, tearing it out of his body. Blood welled inside him.

Vox watched in barely conscious nausea as Alastor was forced to eat the organ. Next, Alastor rammed a hand through his diaphragm and gripped his heart, piercing it with his claws.

Vox should have been dead, but it occurred to him that the trials wouldn’t let him die unless he chose to off himself, which meant Alastor could keep going and it would be agony, but he couldn’t *kill* him.

Vox fought through the haze of blood loss and torment. He rubbed Alastor’s back. “I’ve got you,” he murmured. “It’s okay, Al. I’m here.”

Alastor’s face drained of colour when he yanked Vox’s beating heart from his chest.

Vox managed a weak smile. “Take it. It’s already yours, sweetheart.”

Alastor began tearing pieces of it away, throwing the slivers of muscle carelessly to the side. His eyes were dials, swinging rapidly with his distress.

Vox slid his hand from Alastor’s back into his hair. “I forgive you,” he whispered.

Alastor’s gaze snapped to him as he trembled and dropped the mangled heart, reaching for his intestines instead.

“For hurting me,” Vox clarified weakly as Alastor ripped out a foot of bowel. “For every time you attacked me or abandoned me or made me feel worthless. I forgive you, Alastor.” He

brushed shaky fingers down Alastor's cheek. "Now you've got to forgive yourself."

Alastor's smile held as he clenched his jaw.

"That's what this trial is about," Vox murmured. "We both need to forgive ourselves for the past and *move on*."

Alastor leaned down to the hole in his abdomen and began to *eat*.

Vox closed his eyes to stop himself from being sick. He petted Alastor's hair as his lover shook violently.

"We can't change what happened," Vox mumbled. "But we can promise to take care of each other. We can promise to do better. We can learn from the past without feeling all of this guilt over it."

Alastor dragged Vox's trousers down and slit the tendon at the back of his knee with a sharp claw as he chewed at his liver.

Vox made a weak noise of agony but continued to stroke Alastor's hair.

"Take as long as you need, darling," Vox murmured. "I'm right here with you. You don't have to face this alone. We'll always love and support each other through every triumph and hardship, won't we?"

Alastor's fingers slipped into his vents, massacring the wires and sensors there.

"Won't we?" Vox repeated.

Alastor managed a tiny nod as he swallowed a piece of spleen.

“We won’t make the same mistakes as last time. We won’t leave each other to suffer alone, will we?”

Alastor shook his head once.

Vox rubbed a soft ear. “Then forgive yourself, Al. I’ve forgiven you. You’ve healed me in places I didn’t even know were broken. Made me feel like the luckiest sinner in all of Hell for being granted a second chance with the man I adore. Let go of this awful guilt you’re carrying. You’re only hurting yourself.”

Again, Alastor shook his head.

With some difficulty, Vox threaded his broken fingers through Alastor’s hair, holding his head protectively as Alastor destroyed his body.

“Then I’ll hold you close for as long as it takes for you to believe that you’re worthy of forgiveness.”

It could have been hours or mere minutes - time didn’t have much meaning in purgatory - but after more sweet words of comfort and reassuring touches from Vox, Alastor finally found the strength to peel himself off Vox and vomit.

Vox watched him helplessly, too weak to move, and Alastor’s frame was wracked with sobs and violent shudders as he vomited over and over.

“I’m sorry,” Alastor cried between heaves. “I’m *sorry*.”

Vox managed a small smile. “It’s alright. It wasn’t you. Take it easy, Alastor. You’ve been through a lot.”

Alastor wiped his mouth and shot Vox a wild look. “*I’ve* been through a lot?” he asked hysterically. “You’ve got no fucking organs left!”

Vox’s smile grew strained. “I’m trying not to think about it.” He opened his arms weakly. “Come here.”

Alastor crawled over to him quickly and placed gentle hands around his waist and the agony flooding every inch of Vox’s body began to fade away as Alastor muttered a familiar chant.

“Have you forgiven yourself?” Vox asked lightly as he swept Alastor’s messy hair from his bloodied face.

Alastor nodded stiltedly. “If you can hold me and murmur such loving words when I’m being forced to *eat you alive*, then either you’re certifiably *insane* or I really am worthy of your forgiveness.” He smiled half-heartedly at Vox. “You’re right. Holding onto the mistakes of our past won’t help us.” He gestured to Vox’s body. “If anything, it’ll actively hurt us both *more*.”

Vox huffed a relieved laugh and dragged Alastor on top of his newly-healed frame, tucking his head under his screen as he held him tightly.

“Thank you, Vox,” Alastor whispered. “I wouldn’t have beaten that one alone.”

He had failed the Pain trial last time and now Vox understood why. He rubbed Alastor’s back and kissed his blood-matted hair.

The closed gates appeared beside them and they crawled to their feet, Alastor looking down at himself in surprise when his body was suddenly cleaned of blood and coolant and he was back to looking his tidy self.

Vox pecked his cheek and Alastor flashed him a warm smile before they headed towards the gates.

There was a distant growl that set Vox's nerves on edge and he glanced behind them warily before joining Alastor at the gates.

Which remained closed.

Vox frowned in confusion, glancing at the left stone pillar and its three green lights.

"Vox," Alastor said quietly, pointing at the right pillar.

There were only two green lights.

Vox glanced to the left pillar again, squinting at the name carved faintly above the three lights.

Alastor:

Vox's eyes widened as he turned to his lover. "I... I don't understand," he whispered. "I completed the trial before I found you. Why isn't the light green?"

"...Are you sure?" Alastor asked carefully. "You didn't... miss anything?"

"No," Vox hissed. "Of course I didn't miss anything! There must be some sort of mistake! A faulty light, or—" He shuffled towards the right pillar and tapped on the light. "Or... I don't know! A problem with the system recognising that the trial is complete!"

There was another deep growl, seemingly closer this time. Vox flinched and glanced behind him.

“I don’t think it works like that,” Alastor said slowly as he frowned into the darkness. “Vox, what was that noise?”

“Nothing,” Vox said quickly as his heart began to race and dread tugged at his stomach. “How am I supposed to know? Probably just another poor soul trapped in Purgatory.”

He pulled at the gates but they remained firmly shut.

“Come on,” he muttered under his breath. “Open, damn it.” He pulled harder at them and the growl was much closer this time, echoed by an eerie clicking sound, like the rattle of a snake but far more unsettling.

Vox’s breaths came faster. “Fuck! Why won’t you open?”

There were heavy, thudding footsteps, like nearby thunder. The creatures were *running*.

Vox kicked desperately at the gates.

Alastor placed a hand on his shoulder. “Vox? What is that?”

Vox threw him a wide-eyed look as something grabbed his leg.

They turned to the two towering monsters hidden by darkness. They oozed thick, inky liquid yet their forms appeared to be made of rock and metal. They were covered in sharp spikes and their hands were as wide as doors. Their bodies seemed to move and change shape, new metal and rock being formed as other pieces crumbled away, and they smelled of rot and alcohol and cigarettes.

They growled and clicked and hissed, and their teeth were made of shards of glass.

Vox whimpered in terror and turned to Alastor.

“Help me,” he begged, and Alastor’s eyes widened.

Vox was dragged into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Forced cannibalism, Non-con (sort of? It doesn't actually happen)

I am having so much fun with these chapters :) I'm like "hm...how can I torture these two next?" XD

UPDATE: There is now fanart for this chapter by the incredible *MarJunipo*

<https://twitter.com/NaroJunipo/status/1854969859211243856?>

[t=s4rL_fD0d9CINrUHDpTtzQ&s=19](https://twitter.com/NaroJunipo/status/1854969859211243856?)

Chapter 57: Pain - Pt. II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alastor raced through the void, chasing after the sounds of Vox's frantic struggling.

"I'm coming!" Alastor yelled as Vox cried out in agony, and his heart pumped faster when he heard Vox's desperate whimpers and pleas for the monsters to stop hurting him.

Alastor pushed himself harder but the monsters were quicker and Vox's voice began to fade away.

Alastor slowed to a stop when he realised he could no longer hear his lover.

"No you don't," he muttered to himself as he whirled around, ears pricked up and listening for any hint of Vox. "Where are you?" he shouted.

No response.

He ran a hand through his hair, grinding his teeth together. "Vox!" he yelled. "Vox, where are you?"

His breaths shook. He could still taste Vox's liver on his tongue. Could still smell the stench of his bowel being torn apart. Could still feel the pulsing mess of Vox's heart at his fingertips.

He squeezed his eyes shut and inhaled slowly. He picked a direction and walked onwards, calling for his lover.

After a while, Alastor stumbled across a bed.

It was a small bed, with thin off-white sheets and scratchy pillows.

Alastor stared at it for a moment, walking around it before perching on its edge. Nothing happened.

He inspected the bed for a few minutes then looked beneath it, and through the other side he could see what appeared to be a bedroom. He stood, looking to the other side of the bed and he saw nothing but empty void.

With a frown, Alastor crawled under the bed. It was a tight squeeze with his seven-foot frame, but he was lithe enough that he managed.

His breath hitched at the sight of a bloodied and beaten Vox being dragged into the bedroom by the two monsters. He struggled uselessly against them and they struck him across the screen, cracking it with their metal spikes. He whimpered and shied away from them and yelped when one of them gripped his arm and blistered his skin with its molten touch.

They opened the closet and threw him roughly against the back wall and he crumpled in a broken heap amidst the children's clothes that were stored there.

Alastor snarled as they slammed the closet shut, frame twisting and growing and he tried to wriggle out from under the bed, but he was suddenly too big to work his way out and the monsters left before he had a chance to tear them apart.

There was the sound of a lock clicking into place.

Alastor forced himself to his normal size and crawled out from under the bed with a growl of frustration as he dusted himself off and stalked towards the closet.

“I’m sorry!” wailed a child as Alastor threw the doors open, and the child cowered away from him, throwing his bruised arms over his equally bruised face.

Alastor froze, glancing around quickly for Vox before trailing his gaze back to the child.

“...Vox?” he whispered.

The child hesitated then slowly lowered his arms and peered up at Alastor.

“Alastor?” the child choked out.

Alastor stared at Vox’s messy hair and the bruise circling one of his brown eyes, which now had blood creeping towards the iris, and it occurred to Alastor that Vox hadn’t been *born* with two different coloured eyes.

“Who are they?” Alastor asked as he crouched down, letting his frame fill the closet door, hiding this young Vox from view. He was quite certain that he already knew the answer.

“My parents,” Vox whimpered, averting his gaze.

“Let me see,” Alastor murmured, holding a hand out, and Vox crawled towards Alastor trustingly, perching in his lap and snuggling against his chest in search of comfort. Alastor splayed a protective hand over his back, fury growing.

He muttered his usual healing chant and frowned when the bruises immediately returned once he finished the spell.

“You can’t heal a memory,” Vox murmured as he cuddled into Alastor’s body. “Although you can apparently interact with it.”

Alastor clenched his jaw and petted Vox's hair, biting his tongue at the sight of the cigar burns on the back of Vox's head.

Curious, he swept his fingers underneath Vox's sweater and growled quietly at the lines of cigar burns on either side of his spine. His heart ached at the realisation that Vox's ports had taken the place of each burn.

"I've moved on," Vox murmured, guessing where Alastor's thoughts lay. "Don't pity me."

Alastor frowned and rubbed his back carefully. "I don't think you have, my dear. I think that's why the light isn't green."

Vox gripped Alastor's shirt and his fingers were so *small*. His tiny body felt fragile in Alastor's arms. "I'm past all this," Vox insisted petulantly. "I've not seen my parents in decades. They have no hold over me anymore."

There was a series of heavy banging on the door to the bedroom and Vox flinched, burying his face into Alastor's chest.

"Go away, go away, go away," he muttered under his breath, eyes squeezed shut and the banging grew louder, more insistent, the door rattling on its hinges.

Alastor's heart broke and he placed a finger beneath Vox's chin, forcing him to look up. "Darling, I think they have *some* hold over you."

Vox's lip wobbled before he gritted his teeth and clutched at Alastor. "Don't make me face them," he whimpered. "I'm not... I'm not *strong* enough. Not like this."

Alastor carded his fingers through his hair. "They'll always be bigger and stronger and scarier than you if you don't face them, no matter whether you're an innocent young boy or a seven-foot Overlord who can bend electricity to his will."

Vox winced as voices yelled indistinctly behind the door, the pounding growing heavier and heavier until the door threatened to fall off its hinges. "Help me, Alastor. I... I can't do this alone. I need you by my side."

Alastor's gaze softened. "Of course, my love." He kissed the top of Vox's head and tried to recall what he had looked like at the age of ten.

Vox blinked before a wide smile spread across his face. "Cool."

Alastor peered down at himself and made a noise of amusement. He was an inch shorter than Vox, with soft, dark curls and huge, chocolate eyes. He wasn't as slim as Vox (and now he thought about it, Vox looked a little malnourished) and he wore a white shirt with black shorts and socks, and a red blazer.

"How adorable are you?" Vox teased before he flinched as the door flew open. He clutched anxiously at Alastor and they watched as a man and a woman stepped into the room.

The man took a drag from his cigar as his wife staggered drunkenly after him. Their eyes landed on Vox.

"I don't remember giving you permission to bring a friend over, you little shitstain," the man growled as he stalked towards Vox.

He was tall and broad with slicked black hair and a fine moustache, and he wielded his cigar at Vox threateningly.

Alastor bristled, holding Vox a fraction tighter as Vox cowered from the man.

"Who the fuck are you?" his mother slurred, pointing a bottle of gin at Alastor before taking a swig from it and nearly falling over.

Alastor smiled viciously. “The monster under his bed. You’d better watch your step; I *bite*.”

Vox’s mother wrinkled her nose in confusion as his father curled his lip in disdain before looking at Vox. “I’ve told you before, boy. I don’t want your weird-ass friends in my house. You don’t listen. You *never* listen.”

“Because he’s *stupid*,” grunted his mother before she lobbed the empty bottle at Vox’s head. It struck Vox’s cheek and he grimaced.

Alastor tensed and contemplated throwing the bottle back, but Vox frowned and lifted his chin.

“I’m not stupid,” he said. “I… I’m actually quite smart. I got into university when few people did and I made a career doing something I loved, and when I went to Hell, I became the CEO of a tech enterprise and-”

“And what? You think that makes you better than us?” his father growled.

Vox swallowed. “No. No, that’s not what I-”

“That’s *exactly* what he thinks,” sneered his mother as she staggered closer and spat on Vox’s face.

Vox wiped the saliva away with a grimace as fury and disgust boiled inside Alastor.

“I just wanted to show you that I’m not stupid,” Vox said, subdued, and Alastor watched his brows draw together, chest aching. He had never seen Vox so submissive. Had never seen him so resigned. How long had Vox suffered this sort of abuse from his parents?

“Then how come you can’t follow simple instructions?” his father asked in disdain before he began unbuckling his belt. “Come here.”

Vox’s eyes widened, face draining of colour. “No, wait. That’s not fair-”

“Did you just tell me *no*?” Vox’s father growled dangerously and Vox flinched.

“No! No, I swear! I didn’t mean it like that!”

“This is my house, boy,” his father snarled. “And when you’re under my roof, you do as I say. If you disagree, you can go live on the fucking street and eat garbage like the worthless *rat* you are.” He doubled his belt over. “Now, get your ass over here and take your shirt off.”

Vox trembled violently and shook his head. “Dad, please-”

“Get over here or I’ll break one of your fucking fingers!”

Vox shook as he clambered to his feet and shuffled towards his father.

Alastor caught his arm with a scowl and Vox glanced at him, seemingly surprised that he was still there.

“Vox, you’re one of the most powerful Overlords in Hell,” Alastor said lowly. “Stand up for yourself.”

Vox blinked, eyes growing a little brighter as he remembered who he was. He turned to his father, but yelped when meaty fingers gripped his hair and dragged him the rest of the way until he was forced onto his knees at his father’s feet.

“Take your fucking shirt off, you vile piece of shit!”

Vox flinched again and began removing his shirt.

“Vox,” Alastor said firmly. “You don’t have to listen to him.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are, you little brat?” Vox’s mother snapped and Alastor whirled on her with an unsettling grin.

“I’m about three seconds away from carving your eyes out, you useless *bitch*.”

Vox barked out a surprised laugh as his mother recoiled, but he shouted in protest when his father tore his shirt off him and suddenly slammed his face into the carpet, striking him hard across his spine with the belt.

Vox screamed.

The sound echoed through Alastor like a flame to a stick of dynamite, and he lunged forwards with a snarl, shifting into his usual demonic form, dials in his eyes, antlers rising, and teeth bared as he grabbed Vox’s father by the throat.

“Touch him again and I’ll rip off both of your hands,” Alastor warned.

Vox’s father ground his teeth together, grabbed Alastor by his collar, and suddenly *hurled him into the far wall*.

Alastor groaned softly as he picked himself up off the floor and his gaze snapped to Vox when he let out another agonised scream as his father laid into him once more with the belt, pinning him down so he couldn’t escape as his mother cackled above them.

“If you’re too stupid to listen, I’ll have to beat some fucking sense into you,” growled his father as Vox’s skin became painted with angry red and purple marks before finally splitting open when the buckle struck him.

Vox sobbed and lay still and submissive as he waited for the punishment to stop.

Except the punishment didn’t stop. Vox’s father continued to hit him over and over until his back grew bloody and still, Vox remained silent and unwilling to protest. Alastor raced forwards, bowling Vox’s father over with a snarl as he clawed at the evil man, but his human appearance was quickly stripped away and Alastor was left facing one of the towering black monsters from earlier.

He gasped as he was slammed into the wall and his stomach impaled by three metal spikes protruding from the creature’s knuckles.

Vox’s gaze whipped around to him. “Alastor,” he breathed and he tried to stand, and when his injuries prevented him from doing that, he tried to crawl towards Alastor, but his mother grabbed him by his hair and threw him onto his back as she straddled him. She summoned a gin bottle from *nowhere*, smashed it against the bed frame and plunged the broken neck into Vox’s cheek.

Vox writhed beneath her as she sneered at him in disgust, seemingly more sober.

“You’re a worthless little cunt, aren’t you?” she said with a smirk. “Say it. Say you’re stupid and worthless and perverted. Tell me how ugly you are. Tell me how weak and pathetic you are. Say all that and I might stop.”

Vox whimpered as the glass bit into his cheekbone. “I’m stupid and worthless and perverted,” he whined. “I’m so fucking ugly and weak-”

“No!” Alastor snarled, grimacing as the metal penetrated deeper into his abdomen. “No, you’re not, Vox! You’re stronger than this! I know you are. Stand up to them! Fight back!”

“I can’t,” Vox whispered.

“You can,” Alastor insisted. “Of course you can, Vox! You stood up to Valentino. You stood up to *me*. You’re stronger than both of them, you’ve achieved far more than both of them combined. You’re *better* than both of them. So prove it!”

Vox hesitated and Alastor made a pained sound as another set of metal rods tore through his palm, pinning it to the wall. He inhaled shakily and met Vox’s fearful gaze.

“I fell in love with you for your intelligence,” he said quietly. “I fell in love with you for your wit and charm and kindness. I fell in love with you for your *strength* - both physically and psychologically.” He managed a grin. “And I think you’re terribly handsome - both as a human and a demon. Do you have any idea how dashing you look in a suit?” He exhaled painfully. “And don’t even get me started on your true form - it’s the prettiest thing in all of Hell and I’d very much like to see it again *once we get out of here*.”

Vox blinked, cheeks red.

Alastor’s gaze softened. “Who cares what they think? They don’t matter. They’re worthless. Pathetic. Weak enough to give in to vices. They’re the stupid ones - the ones who didn’t want children but were too idiotic to protect themselves against a pregnancy.” He smiled sincerely. “You are *loved*, Vox. Not just by me, but by Velvette and Rosie and Charlie and all of your ridiculous *fans*. You are loved and wanted and admired by so many people. You don’t need your parents, my dear. They don’t deserve you.”

Vox’s breath hitched softly.

Alastor was struck across the face by a boulder-shaped fist.

He slumped to the floor and the monster straddled his back, raising a fist above his skull for a crushing blow.

“Get the fuck away from him!” Vox roared as he swung his little knuckles into his mother’s face, making her stagger backwards. He leapt to his feet and charged at the monster hovering above Alastor, and the lights in the room flickered and flashed as the young Vox gathered a charge and gripped the monster’s leg.

The monster howled in agony and crumbled as it was electrocuted, revealing Vox’s father beneath its rocky exterior.

Vox hurled his father away from Alastor with adult strength and stood in front of the fallen Radio Demon, chest heaving and teeth grinding.

“I never asked to be your son!” Vox snarled. “It wasn’t my fault that I was *born*! But you certainly punished me like it was! You made my childhood *hell*! And Alastor’s right - I *didn’t* deserve it! I never deserved it because I was a *good son*! I did *everything* you asked, I kept out of your way, I left you to drink and smoke and *fuck*! I learned to never ask for anything I wanted or needed! I learned how to cook for myself and wash my own clothes and I grew up far earlier than I should have because you were never there for me!”

Tears rolled down Vox’s cheeks as he clenched his fists. “I never had a childhood! I never got to do the things other kids did and I got bullied for it! I couldn’t go to parties because you wouldn’t take me. I couldn’t go on field trips because you wouldn’t sign the permission slip. I taught myself *everything* and each night I was terrified of coming home because I knew you’d find something to criticise me about. I learned to hide the bruises and wounds because you hit me when child protection came around and I *shouldn’t* have. I should have let them lock you away but I was young and afraid of what would happen if I lost my parents, but I was also terrified of what you’d do to me when you got out.”

Vox wiped away his tears angrily. “I loved you even when you didn’t love me. I thought if I was quiet and submissive and let you hurt me because you clearly *enjoyed* it, I thought you’d eventually start to love me. I thought that for *years*. Even in college, I held out hope that you’d show up to my graduation. When I got my first job, I hoped you’d say you were proud of me. When I became a television star, I thought you’d finally admit that I’d done *okay* for myself. But you never fucking did, did you? No matter what I did, no matter how successful I was, I would never be good enough for you. You’d always treat me like *pure shit*.”

Vox narrowed his eyes and he began to grow as he stalked towards his parents, skin turning navy and cyan claws extending from his fingers as he took on the familiar shape of the

Television Demon.

“But I’m older now. Bigger. *Wiser*. And I’ve learned that I fucking *hate* you for everything you did to me. And I’ve learned that I don’t have to be afraid of you any more because I *am* stronger than you, better than you, cleverer than you.” Vox grinned viciously. “And I’d quite like to strangle you both with that fucking belt.”

He grabbed them both by the throat and slammed them against the wall, grinning wider as they gagged and choked. “Big mistake hurting the man I love,” Vox hissed as he gathered a charge and released it upon his parents.

They screamed in agony but the sound soon tapered into laughter and they smirked at Vox as though they knew a secret.

Vox scowled and discharged another wave of electricity through them and this time, they barely flinched.

Vox’s eyes widened as they morphed into two towering monsters once more and one of them slammed a fist into his face, cracking his screen.

Vox stumbled backwards and Alastor sprung to his feet, staggering a little at the pain shooting through his hand and stomach, before dragging Vox away from the pair.

“Did you really think that would work?” asked one of the monsters in an inhuman voice - something serpentine that echoed and clicked and growled deeply with each syllable.

“Vox?” Alastor muttered nervously as they retreated.

Vox licked his lips, sparks dancing between his antennae as he fisted Alastor’s shirt. “I don’t fucking know,” he hissed. “I thought it *would* work!”

“Are you... still afraid of them?” Alastor asked helplessly.

“I am *now*,” Vox snapped and Alastor grimaced before glancing at the open door that led into the corridor.

“Are we... supposed to run?”

“Sounds like a fantastic plan,” Vox said before grabbing Alastor’s arm and darting forwards, narrowly dodging the outstretched hands of the huge monsters.

However, as Vox put a foot in the corridor, the floor fell away, revealing a deadly drop into an endless ocean with rough, stormy waves.

Vox clung to the frame with a shout of alarm and the monsters turned around with vicious grins and *shoved* Alastor through the door.

Vox caught his hand and Alastor stared up at him fearfully as he dangled high above an unforgiving ocean that would swallow him whole. Vox gripped the frame with his other hand and attempted to pull Alastor to safety, but one of the monsters bludgeoned him across the back and Vox cried out as something cracked in his spine.

He was beaten again and he crumpled to his knees, his grip on Alastor loosening for a brief second before he held him tighter, nearly breaking Alastor’s fingers.

Alastor lost his breath as he watched Vox be impaled by metal spires and still the Television Demon clung to him.

One of the monster’s hands glowed orange like molten lava and it gripped the arm Vox was using to hold on to Alastor, burning his skin down to wires and metallic bones.

Vox howled with agony but still he held on, unable to fight back.

Fear gripped Alastor's chest as he looked down at the vast ocean, but as he stared up at his pained, vulnerable lover, he swallowed.

"Let me go."

Vox looked at him wildly and Alastor managed a weak smile.

"Let me go," he repeated softly.

"You'll fucking *die!*" Vox snarled, crying out as he received another blow to the spine, effectively breaking it.

His face glitched and his frame sparked erratically as he held onto Alastor despite his broken spine.

"I won't," Alastor said gently. "The trials can't kill me - I have to end my own life."

Tears of agony dripped off Vox's screen. "Stupid buck! This is you *choosing* to end your own life to save me!"

Alastor's eyes widened as icy reality hit him and suddenly, the ocean seemed a lot darker and a lot more ruthless.

It made sense why so many souls supposedly committed suicide in Purgatory - a lot did it to save each other.

A shard of metal broke through the centre of Vox's screen and his distorted face flickered to black as a haunting scream tore from his vocoder. The molten hand on Vox's arm snapped

two cables and Alastor tried to summon his shadows, tried to summon *any* magic that would pull the monsters away from Vox, but this wasn't his trial and his attempts were futile.

Another set of metal spires speared through Vox's chest, tips dripping with blood, and Vox trembled as he let go of the door frame to quickly grab Alastor with his other hand before his arm melted away from his body and fell into the ocean.

The only things keeping Vox from tumbling into the ocean with Alastor were the spires impaled through his back and out through his chest.

Alastor felt sick as he watched the monsters start on Vox's legs with their boulder-like fists.

"Let me go," Alastor said desperately. He couldn't be the cause of Vox's agony. He couldn't watch Vox suffer when there was something he could do about it. "Vox, let me go."

"You'll d-d-die!" Vox snarled, vocoder glitching. His screen was black and shattered and Alastor couldn't see his expression, which made everything ten times *worse* because he needed Vox to drop him and Alastor wanted to see his face one last time and-

An electronic scream was ripped from Vox as the monsters pulverised his right leg, leaving nothing but snapped cables, twisted metal and mashed muscle.

"Drop me, you stupid picturebox!" Alastor begged. There was no other way out of this torture. Vox *had* to drop him otherwise he would be battered for all eternity and Alastor would be forced to *watch*, knowing it was his fault.

"I-I-I can take the *tzch* fucking p-pain, Alastor!" Vox managed. "I can't t-t-take los-zzz-ing you!"

Alastor's eyes prickled with tears as he watched the monsters' hands glow orange before they gripped Vox's intact leg.

Alastor let go of Vox's hand.

Vox made a strained noise and gripped Alastor harder. "No!" he screamed. "If you f-f-fall, I'll fuck- *tch*- ing jump afffter you!"

Alastor gripped Vox's hand once more with a frustrated growl.

"I d-don't care *tcz* what th-th-they do to me. They don't *czz* matter. I'll hold ooon for eternity if that's w-w-what it *tzz* takes. I w-won't let my p-p-parents desttttroy my life again. I won't l-l-let them taaake you away."

He froze. "*Fuck.*"

Alastor frowned in confusion. "What?"

"They don't matter," Vox said, vocoder suddenly clearing. "Being angry at them, *hating* them... it's pointless. Because nothing I do will ever be good enough for them and they *like* me being miserable and angry because *they* are miserable and angry and I-"

His screen healed over, scowling face flickering into view. He gritted his teeth when there was another blow to his broken spine.

"Get the fuck off me," Vox snapped and the monsters grinned at him with their glass teeth. "Fuck your grinning," Vox huffed. "I'm done with this. I'm done *caring* what you think. I'm done letting you hurt me. I'm done being angry at you and hating you - you aren't worth the effort."

The monsters' grins fell and Vox's spine healed over, his legs reforming.

“Get off me,” he said again, firmly and the monsters looked at each other in confusion.

“Are you deaf?” Vox huffed. “Get away from me. We’re done here. *I’m done*. I don’t need you. I’ve never fucking needed you. And I don’t need my feelings for you affecting my feelings for Alastor or anyone else I care about.”

A new arm grew from the melted stump that had been left behind and he dragged Alastor up into the room before standing and brushing himself off with a grumble.

He glared at the two monsters, which were quickly crumbling away to reveal his two scowling parents - this time as demons.

They were both taller than Vox and his father was bulkier, but there was nothing particularly special about them - nothing particularly powerful or impressive or *memorable* about their demon forms. In fact, they looked quite scruffy. Miserable.

“I’ve spent so long listening to your lies and insults that I *believed* them,” said Vox. “And I let it affect my relationship with my friends and lovers. I let myself believe that I was worthless and weak and perverted and I let other people’s words hurt me when they didn’t even *mean* to hurt me and- *fuck! That’s* what this trial is about.”

He huffed out an incredulous laugh and gestured to his parents. “Why do I still care what you think? You’re just a drunk *bitch* and an asshole with anger issues. You’re miserable and lonely and you have no friends because no one can stand to be around either of you, and you were so pathetic that you had to bully a *child* just to feel like you were in control of something in your lives.”

His father drew back his fist and Vox caught it easily.

“No. You don’t get to do that anymore. You don’t get to do that ever again.” He threaded his arm through Alastor’s, standing tall as he straightened his suit. “Looks like you got your wish. I’m finally out of your lives for good. I won’t bother you anymore and you won’t bother me, and we never have to see each other again. I’m done being angry at you. I’m done

hoping you'll be proud of me. I'm done craving your affection. I'm done being hurt by you. I'm done feeling *anything* for you."

He shook his head in pity. "I truly hope that one day, you get even a *taste* of the happiness I've found."

He tightened his hold on Alastor's arm and turned away from his parents and Alastor gasped when he led them through the door.

Except this time, there was no ocean, only darkness. Alastor whirled around and found that Vox's bedroom had melted away.

A bell tolled.

The third light turned green.

The gates opened.

Alastor glanced down at himself to see he was fully healed and his clothes had been repaired. He turned to Vox with admiration in his gaze and Vox side-eyed him, unimpressed.

"Don't ever call me 'stupid' again."

Alastor grinned sheepishly. "I said it out of emotionally distressed love."

Vox smiled lop-sidedly and snaked an arm around his waist. "Promise me one thing?"

"Hm?"

“No more self-sacrificial bullshit?” Vox asked sweetly and Alastor’s ears drooped.

“I thought-”

“You thought wrong. There’s always a way to beat these trials. It’s just a matter of figuring it out. Promise me you’ll never offer to fucking kill yourself again,” Vox said seriously.

Alastor licked his lips and nodded, strangely breathless at this fresh confidence in Vox. He whirled his lover around to face him, catching the bottom of his screen with one finger.

“I’m sorry, my love,” Alastor said sincerely. “I promise I’ll never propose *suicide* as a way to beat these trials.” He paused. “But in my defence, I initially didn’t realise that I was proposing suicide.”

Vox’s mouth drew into a thin, unhappy line. “I realised as much. Perhaps that’s why no soul has made it through the trials. Perhaps they thought, like you, that if it wasn’t their trial, they would survive self-sacrifice.”

“It does feel rather manipulative,” Alastor said. “Deceiving. Like the fine print of a nefarious contract.”

Vox nodded, hands settling on Alastor’s hips as he frowned worriedly. “Which is... concerning. We have three trials left. How else are we going to be tricked into offing ourselves?”

“And why was your trial in two parts?” Alastor asked with a scowl. “That doesn’t seem very fair. A second chance at making you fail.”

Vox pursed his lips. “It *isn’t* fair. It’s like having to face *another* trial.”

Alastor hummed unhappily before his gaze softened and he kissed Vox lips slowly, tenderly. “Hm. I think you deserve a reward for saving me *twice*.”

Vox pulsed playful static through Alastor and it was *bliss* after all the emotional torment and forced cannibalism they had just faced.

“Oh?” Vox purred. “What sort of reward?”

Alastor chuckled and mouthed kisses along Vox’s neck. “I think you know what sort of reward,” he teased.

Vox made a noise of intrigue and tugged Alastor’s hips against his. “You know, as delicious as you look kneeling before me, lapping at my cock like it’s the best lollipop you’ve ever tasted, I think right now, I’d actually prefer to kiss your pretty lips and stroke us both until we’re hard and aching and coming on each other’s stomachs.”

Alastor hummed in approval as he unzipped Vox and Vox unzipped him and they kissed heatedly as Alastor wrapped his fingers around both of their cocks, stroking them slowly. Vox’s hand closed around his and his other hand threaded into Alastor’s hair as they lapped into each other’s mouths, and Alastor clutched Vox’s back possessively as he rutted into their linked fists-

“Oh, for *fuck’s sake!*”

They startled at Roo’s voice, looking around in alarm.

“Every damn trial!” Roo snarled, her voice less of an unnerving whisper and more... normal. “You two are like fucking rabbits!”

Vox barked out a laugh as Alastor’s cheeks darkened.

“I can *see* everything, you know?” she hissed. “Why couldn’t you have thrown yourself into that damn ocean? *Shit!*”

Vox grinned. “Just... look away.”

Alastor bit back a laugh.

“Stop trying to fuck each other after every trial!” she snapped.

“It’s motivational sex,” Alastor drawled. “You wouldn’t like us to be demotivated would you?”

“You’re supposed to be *miserable!*” Roo hissed. “I’ve seen souls search for comfort from one another after a trial, but you two are ridiculous! It’s disgusting!”

“For you, maybe,” Vox said. “But we’re having fun.” He winked at Alastor playfully. “Hey, sit down, sweetheart, and let me ride your fat, veiny, pulsing cock.”

Alastor snorted and squeezed Vox’s ass and Roo snarled before summoning the chain around Alastor’s neck and jerking him backwards.

Vox lunged for the chain and yanked hard at it and Alastor watched as two links began to prise open - the bent one and the one below it - but the chain vanished in Vox’s grip and he fell against Alastor, both of them tumbling to the floor.

They stared at each other with wide eyes.

“It’s almost broken,” Vox whispered, stunned.

Alastor swallowed and pushed Vox onto his back, kissing him filthily.

“Foul beasts!” Roo screeched and she summoned the chain around Vox’s neck this time, trying to drag him out from under Alastor, but Alastor gripped Vox’s chain and pulled as he sucked at Vox’s tongue.

The chain strained and the links weakened before disappearing.

Roo growled angrily, the air growing icy, which only pushed Alastor and Vox further against one another’s warmth.

“Do you know how long I’ve spent alone in here, isolated, *trapped*, and now I’m forced to watch you two fucking *idiots* hump each other like dogs?” she roared. “I spent *decades* trying to keep you two apart and now I have to watch this vile *filth*?”

Alastor grinned spitefully into the darkness.

“*Suffer.*”

Vox cackled, tearing Alastor out of his shirt. “That’s right, you evil bitch! Enjoy the fucking show!”

He arched as Alastor trailed his tongue over his stomach like he was starving for it, and Alastor mouthed adoring kisses over the flesh he had ripped into earlier, following circuit tracks and lapping at the LED strips that comprised Vox’s nipples.

Vox smoothed his palms down Alastor’s back, touching every scar and old wound he could reach as Alastor slipped his hands beneath Vox and touched his ports reverently, whispering words of worship and adoration against his scarred flesh.

“Beautiful. Perfect. Clever. Strong. Determined. Fun. Worthy. *Loved.*” He punctuated each word with a kiss to a different area - his chest, his stomach, his arm, his vent, his hips, his neck, and Vox kissed him hard on the lips, massaging his ear and rubbing his back as he did so.

“Grind your hips,” Vox murmured against Alastor’s lips. “Want to feel you. Want you to come on me.”

Alastor shuddered and kissed Vox eagerly, pulling his trousers down further as Vox shimmied his down too. He slipped his fingers into Vox’s ports, pulsing wave after wave of devoted, *aroused* static through his circuits and Vox’s frequency rubbed deliciously against his as he humped Vox’s cock.

Vox cursed and sat upright and Alastor fisted their cocks and pumped them slowly, head tipping back with a groan as Vox gripped his hips and sucked enthusiastically at his nipple.

He thumbed the cherry fur above Alastor’s dick and slid his other hand over Alastor’s back to better support him and Alastor placed a protective hand around the back of Vox’s neck as his lover sucked and nipped greedily at his nipple.

Roo screeched at them in fury and they wholeheartedly ignored her.

“Pull my hair,” murmured Alastor and Vox did so immediately, mouth latching onto the fading hickey he had made earlier as Alastor’s throat was bared. Alastor’s tail wiggled as he moaned and he squeezed their cocks hard, making Vox’s hips snap upwards.

“Fuck, I need you,” Vox muttered. “Need you to fuck me so bad.”

“Thought you wanted me to grind against you?” Alastor teased and Vox held him tighter and nipped at his hickey.

“Need all of it. Need all of you.” He squeezed Alastor’s tail. “Want to taste you. Want you to fuck me. Want you to suck my dick. Want you to kiss me and stroke us both. I want all of it.”

Alastor kissed his mouth and closed his eyes as he focused on Vox’s warmth and adoring static. “Do you want to fuck me?”

Vox hesitated and Alastor trailed a finger down his antenna. “You can be honest, my dear. Do you want to fuck me?”

Vox nodded, arms snaking protectively around Alastor. “I would never ask you for-”

“I want you to,” Alastor said gently. “But not here. When we escape Purgatory, I want you to lay me on our bed and make love to me. I want you to kiss every inch of me and tell me you love me, and then I want to feel you inside me.”

Vox stared up at Alastor with wide eyes. “I want that,” he whimpered. “I want that too.”

“I want to give you everything, my dear,” Alastor murmured as he traced the thick scars Valentino had left on Vox’s shoulders. “I want to give you all of me. You deserve *everything*.”

“So do you,” Vox said softly as he closed his hand around Alastor’s fist where he was pumping them both. “Come here and kiss me.”

Alastor did as he was told and he made a quiet sound of pleasure as Vox ruined his mouth. When he came, Vox swallowed his moan and smirked when Alastor slicked two fingers with his own fluids and pushed them inside Vox. Vox groaned into his mouth as he jerked himself harder.

“Let me see,” Alastor murmured against his lips. “I want to watch.” He pushed himself up and watched himself finger Vox as the Television Demon arched and writhed below him and

he splayed his free hand over Vox's chest, pushing him flat as he made Vox work harder for his release.

He smiled when he noticed Vox's intense gaze on him, hearts in his eyes.

"You look gorgeous, my darling," Alastor purred and Vox tensed, coming over his hand with a quiet cry.

Alastor lay over him, kissing him deeply as he continued to finger him, and Vox whimpered and nipped Alastor's lip needily. "Don't stop," he murmured. "Fuck, don't stop, sweetheart."

He toyed with Vox's antenna as he kissed his lover and when Vox became too overwhelmed, too sensitive to stroke his spent dick, Alastor slid down his body and kitten-licked at him, pushing his fingers deeper until they brushed against Vox's prostate.

"Fuck!" Vox whined, snapping his hips up, and Alastor smoothed his tongue over Vox's soft cock as he curled his fingers inside him once more.

Vox fisted his hair and Alastor slipped his fingers between his lover's, giving the Television Demon something to hold on to. He wrapped his lips around Vox's cock and he felt Vox tense beneath him, stilling his hips as best he could, and Alastor's chest warmed with affection for his considerate lover.

"Relax," Alastor murmured as he squeezed Vox's hand.

"Don't want to hurt you," Vox managed, thighs trembling as Alastor's fingers pumped inside him.

Alastor kissed the inside of Vox's thigh. "You won't, my dear. Relax. Let me take care of you."

He swallowed Vox down again, brushing his lover's prostate once more, and Vox made a needy sound as he jerked his hips. Alastor squeezed his hand in encouragement when Vox looked at him with wide, worried eyes, and the Television Demon's breath hitched as Alastor bobbed his head, sucking and licking happily at his lover.

Alastor caught his prostate again and Vox thrust into Alastor's mouth once more, stilling immediately, but Alastor hummed and squeezed his hand and Vox slowly rolled his hips, gently rocking into Alastor's mouth.

"Feel so good," Vox whimpered as he tightened his grip on Alastor's hand. "So good at taking care of me."

Alastor's tail wiggled at the praise and he pushed his fingers faster into Vox, smirking when his lover arched and fisted his hair tighter. Heat pooled in Alastor's belly and he realised that he quite enjoyed Vox pulling his hair. He enjoyed seeing Vox *desperate*.

Vox looked down at him with a wild heart-eyed gaze, chest heaving, antennae sparking, and fans running on high, and he was the most beautiful thing Alastor had ever seen. Alastor's heart raced and he fingered Vox with renewed vigour, and Vox trembled a little at the overstimulation.

"Can I fuck your mouth?" he choked out and Alastor squeezed his hand and nodded eagerly. He wanted to see his picturebox come apart.

Vox started slow, watching Alastor closely for any signs of discomfort before he began thrusting in earnest, fingers tight in Alastor's hair, and he writhed and cursed beneath Alastor, clearly oversensitive, but enjoying himself too much to stop.

Damn, he was gorgeous.

Alastor hummed around Vox's dick, smirking, and Vox's gaze roamed hungrily over Alastor's face before the Radio Demon rammed against his prostate, and Vox suddenly cried out, body trembling.

“Too much?” Alastor asked as he pulled off Vox.

Vox nodded, panting.

Alastor pulled his fingers out of Vox and wiped them on whatever qualified as a floor in this place. Vox whimpered at the loss and gripped Alastor's hand tighter. With a chuckle, Alastor crawled up Vox's body and settled on top of him, nuzzling into his chest as he traced swirling patterns over his side.

Vox exhaled slowly and wrapped an arm around Alastor, using his other hand to sweep his hair into some semblance of order.

“Fuck, I love you,” Vox managed.

Alastor chuckled and closed his eyes. “I'm rather fond of you too, old pal.”

There was a rumble of thunder and a loud bang and a flash of golden light in the distance, and Alastor instinctively knelt above Vox with a snarl, antlers rising and dials swinging as his tail flashed white in warning, ears swivelling to determine the location of the new threat.

Beneath him, Vox's body sparked, left eye swirling hypnotically as he spread his hands protectively over Alastor's back and head.

Silence fell once more and Purgatory remained dark.

Roo was quiet.

“What was that?” Alastor called to her.

No answer.

Alastor frowned and helped Vox to his feet and they quickly redressed themselves.

“We'd better keep moving,” Alastor murmured and Vox nodded uneasily before they stepped through the gates.

Chapter End Notes

You guys were asking how Roo felt about watching these two suck on each other's faces ;)

UPDATE: *MarJunipo* has made some hilarious art for this chapter:

[https://twitter.com/NaroJunipo/status/1855810881889693814?
t=kL7LNAePb1VOdjV45_TwOg&s=19](https://twitter.com/NaroJunipo/status/1855810881889693814?t=kL7LNAePb1VOdjV45_TwOg&s=19)

Chapter 58: Humiliation - Pt. I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Humiliation.

Vox scowled at the word on his wrist and glanced at Alastor, then blinked at the building that had appeared behind him.

“House of mirrors,” Vox said and Alastor raised an eyebrow before turning and blinking at the huge building suspended by darkness. He quirked an impish grin and offered his arm to Vox.

“Yours or mine?”

Vox took Alastor’s arm easily and smirked. “Definitely yours. Gotta see how pretty you look from different angles.”

Alastor rolled his eyes and Vox snickered and pecked his cheek before dragging him towards the house.

They pushed through the door and were faced with a long, convoluted corridor lined with ridiculously shaped mirrors. There were doors between some of the mirrors, each with a neon sign hanging above or to the side of them.

Alastor stepped in front of the first mirror - one that curved shallowly away from the wall - and he snorted in amusement at his distorted reflection.

“How flattering,” he drawled and Vox chuckled and joined his side, glancing at the mirror.

“I haven’t been to a funhouse in decades,” he said before he frowned in confusion at the undistorted reflection of himself.

Alastor tipped his head curiously. “I suppose this is your trial then?”

Vox turned slowly, testing whether the mirror would distort any part of him, but his reflection remained clear and accurate, as though he were standing before an ordinary mirror.

He glanced at the mirror behind him - this one with two convex dips - and once again found his reflection normal whilst Alastor’s was altered.

“Well, this sucks,” grumbled Vox and Alastor laid a hand on his lower back with a chuckle.

“Once we get out of here, I’ll take you to a real funhouse, my dear,” he teased.

Vox manifested digital stars in his eyes as he clasped his hands together and looked at Alastor hopefully. “Reeeally?” he asked, drawing out the word like a child.

Alastor nodded solemnly. “Really, really.”

Vox barked out a laugh, pupils returning to their normal shape as he led Alastor to the first door.

“Y’know, we should actually do that,” Vox mused. “Go on some real dates, I mean.”

Alastor cocked an eyebrow.

“I like you. Sue me,” Vox scoffed before he smiled sheepishly. “But really... I uh... I want to do that. I want to take you out. I want to treat you and take you dancing and go on day trips

and do all that other cutesy shit that couples do.”

Alastor grinned in amusement and Vox’s screen tinted pink. “We don’t have to. It’s Hell, I know. Overlords don’t do crap like that. It’s just... I’ve never really *dated* anyone before. It’s always been about sex and I never got to do the aquarium dates where we hold hands under the shark tunnel, and I never got to do the fairground dates where we steal each other’s cotton candy on top of the ferris wheel, and I never got to do the beach dates where we try to outdo each other’s sandcastles, and I *want*-” Vox quickly clamped his mouth shut, looking away in embarrassment.

Alastor caught the bottom of his screen with a finger. “You’re quite the romantic little picturebox, aren’t you?” he asked quietly, smiling lazily.

“I *want* to be,” Vox admitted. “But I understand if you don’t wanna do all that crap. Doesn’t exactly fit our reputations...”

“Fuck our reputations,” Alastor said softly as he trailed his fingers down the edge of Vox’s screen. “If you want to hold my hand under the shark tunnel, then hold my hand under the shark tunnel. I’m tired of putting on a show for everyone. I’ve been given a second chance with you and I’ll love you however I please, regardless of others’ expectations and opinions.”

A shy smile pulled at Vox’s lips and Alastor grinned brilliantly before kissing the tip of an antenna.

“If you want to go on a date, then we’ll go on a date, or ten, or a hundred. Whatever makes you happy,” Alastor said and Vox tugged him closer, pressing their foreheads together and pulsing affectionate static between them.

“I’m so fucking lucky,” Vox whispered and Alastor held him tightly.

They parted reluctantly and slotted their hands together as they moved to the first door and Vox rubbed his thumb over Alastor’s knuckle, unable to help himself from touching his sweet buck.

“Minx,” Vox read before his brows furrowed. “I knew a sinner called Minx. She was a waitress at a bar I frequented when I first landed in Hell. She was nice to me, in the way all people are nice when they want something. Apparently, she recognised my voice from my days as a television star.”

“What did she want?” Alastor asked curiously.

Vox side-eyed him. “To say she’d slept with a television star.”

Alastor pulled a face, ears drooping comically. “...And did she?”

Vox smiled awkwardly.

Alastor narrowed his eyes at the door.

“Perhaps this is my trial after all,” he grumbled and Vox huffed a laugh.

“Sorry, Al.”

“As long as you remember who you belong to, I can manage,” Alastor purred beside Vox’s screen as he squeezed the Television Demon’s hand.

Vox grinned and opened the door a crack.

“Victor?”

Vox tilted his head, caught off guard by his old name. He opened the door wider and glanced around the room - at the busy bar he recognised.

“Hi, Minx,” he said with a polite grin as a curvy snow leopard-like sinner wandered over to him, carrying a tray of empty glasses. “Long time no see, huh?”

A bright smile swept across her face. “Oh, Victor! Look at you! You look fantastic!”

“Thanks,” he said as his gaze darted across the bustling room of drunk and tipsy sinners, searching for a clue as to what he was supposed to do in this trial.

“You’ve done well for yourself, haven’t you?” she continued, tail flicking. “With that big tech company and all your associates? Even upgraded your head to something sleeker, more modern.” Her voice dropped a couple of pitches and she looked up at Vox through half lidded eyes as she smirked. “We used to have a lot of fun back in the day. If you ever wanted to... *reminisce-*”

“Oh, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Alastor chirped as he stepped into the room and snaked an arm around Vox’s waist with a deadly grin. “I’m Alastor, the Radio Demon. Vox, my darling, care to introduce me to this friend of yours? You’ve never mentioned *anything* about any feline friends!”

Vox bit back a laugh and decided he might as well have some fun since he wasn’t entirely sure what this trial entailed.

“Al, this is Minx.” He said lightly. “My favourite ex-lover.”

The fur on Alastor’s ears stood on end and his teeth clenched so hard that it was a wonder he didn’t chip any. He shot Vox a dangerous smile. “How wonderful! It’s always so *fun* to reunite with a past lover.” He turned to Minx with the same tight grin. “I’m his *current* lover.”

Minx's fluffy ears lowered a fraction and her tail flicking transitioned from contented to irritable. "Oh, I see. It's great to meet you."

"Charmed, I'm sure," said Alastor with a saccharine smile as he offered his hand. When she reluctantly shook it, he caught her wrist with an intrigued hum. "Oh, look at that! You're *married*. Congratulations to the happy couple!"

Vox wasn't quite as subtle at holding in his huff of laughter this time and he covered it with a cough. Alastor pressed into his side, tracing a finger down his arm coyishly until Minx frowned.

"It's complicated," Minx said slowly, glancing at Vox.

"Is it?" Alastor asked impishly,

"He went to Heaven," Minx said with a scowl as her gaze darted once more to Vox. "It isn't really cheating..."

Alastor hummed. "And yet you're still wearing the ring!"

"Not always," she muttered before turning to Vox with a smile. "Come sit at the bar, Vic. First round's on me. We can catch up while I'm serving, yeah?" She looked at him through half-lidded eyes. "And maybe later, if you *did* want to take me up on my generous offer...?"

Vox offered her a polite smile and snaked his arm around Alastor pointedly, eyes sparkling with amusement when Alastor rubbed his cheek against the edge of his screen like a cat marking its territory.

"Sure. Would be nice to have a drink and a catch-up. What do you say, Al?" Vox asked, glancing at his lover.

“Well, it would be rude to turn down a free drink, *darling*,” Alastor drawled and Minx’s ears flattened before she gave them both a strained smile and gestured them through a throng of patrons towards the bar.

They took their seats and Alastor dragged his stool noisily towards Vox and propped himself against his shoulder. “Your best rye,” Alastor said with a sly grin as he openly toyed with the ports at the back of Vox’s head whilst holding eye contact with Minx.

Heat flared in Vox’s belly. He’d had people possessive of him before - *Valentino* had been possessive of him, but *this*... this was a sight to behold.

“What say you, *my love*?” Alastor purred as he nuzzled into the edge of Vox’s screen. “What are you craving tonight?”

You, thought Vox.

“Uh... brandy.”

Minx nodded tightly and wandered to the other end of the bar and Vox watched her go before chuckling when Alastor flicked an antenna in reprimand.

“Hey, you should definitely get another pet name in there,” Vox teased. “I don’t think you made our relationship clear enough when you rubbed your *face* against me.”

Alastor flicked an ear and trailed a finger down the back of Vox’s neck. “Well, one of us has to let her know you’re taken.”

“Getting jealous, sweetheart?” Vox drawled.

“Perish the thought! I’m just showing my appreciation for an old chum!”

“If that’s the case, I’m sure you won’t mind me showing appreciation for *my* old chum? It’s been such an awfully long time since we saw each other last,” Vox whispered and Alastor stiffened and opened his mouth, but Minx arrived with their drinks and Vox plastered on a charming grin.

“Cheers, doll,” he said warmly, raising his glass to her and she perked up, smiling sweetly at him.

Alastor’s glare was stormy and Vox managed to choke back his amusement. This was a *fun* game.

“So, Minx, what have you been up to?” Vox asked curiously. He knew this wasn’t the real Minx, but Purgatory worked in mysterious ways and it could manifest people to look and sound and *do* the things that those people actually did.

“Actually, not much,” Minx said with a self-deprecating laugh. “Still working in this dump, serving the same assholes, waiting for my big break.” She shook her head and gazed at Vox softly. “The worst thing I ever did was break up with you.”

“Cheat on me, you mean,” Vox corrected pleasantly and Minx winced.

Alastor relaxed a fraction and Vox playfully squeezed his thigh.

“Vic, I’m sorry,” Minx said quietly. “I didn’t think what we had was serious and-” She pulled a face and looked away. “You were this big star and I was... nobody. A fan. I thought... I *assumed* you had girls all over Hell.”

Vox shrugged and side-eyed Alastor with a cheeky grin. “It all worked out in the end, I suppose.”

Alastor's ears pricked up happily.

"For you, maybe," huffed Minx. She paused, glancing at Alastor warily before returning her attention to Vox. "Look, I've heard the rumours, and I hope you don't think me too forward for saying this, but I know you and Valentino weren't exactly monogamous and I'm assuming you and the Radio Demon are the same. If you ever wanted to grab a coffee sometime...?"

Alastor had that look in his eye - the one he got when he was considering devouring someone.

"Actually, Alastor and I aren't really into the whole 'sharing' thing," Vox said as he clamped a hand on Alastor's leg to stop him from launching himself across the bar.

Minx frowned. "...Eternity is an awfully long time. You'll drive each other mad if you don't take breaks sometimes."

Alastor's ears were flat, his fur prickling. "We'll manage, don't you worry," he said, lips curled into something that wasn't quite a snarl, but wasn't a smile either.

Vox's heart raced with excitement. This wasn't the sort of possessiveness that Valentino displayed - the sort that could end with Vox being punished as well as the unfortunate sinner Valentino deemed a *threat*. No, this would more likely end with Alastor marching him out of the bar and pinning him against a wall and *fucking* him within an inch of his sanity, or maybe Alastor shoving him up against the counter in front of everyone and kissing him filthily, or- or maybe-

"Vic can speak for himself, you know," Minx snapped, a soft growl bubbling out of her throat.

"So can I," Alastor growled. "And I think it quite rude to throw yourself at a man who's clearly in a relationship."

“A relationship with a fucking psychopath,” she hissed. “Everyone knows what you did to him. Everyone knows how you left him and laughed at him and *fought* him. You’re *enemies*. Whatever *this* is?” she said as she gestured between them. “It’s temporary. A ‘rivals-with-benefits’ kind of arrangement. You’re just a possessive asshole who thinks Vic is a *toy*.”

Alastor sprung to his feet with a snarl and Vox smoothly hooked an arm around his middle and tugged him into his lap. Alastor blinked, startled, and Vox nuzzled an ear.

“Interesting take,” Vox said lightly. “Incorrect, but fascinating nonetheless.” He splayed a hand over Alastor’s stomach.

“Relax, Al,” he whispered into his lover’s ear. “She’s not even real. She’s just an image of someone I haven’t seen in *decades*.”

Alastor pouted and glanced around the bar before he narrowed his eyes at Minx and suddenly whirled around in Vox’s lap and kissed him hard on the mouth.

Minx made a sound of distaste and Alastor nipped Vox’s lip. “Then let me kill her.”

Vox chuckled and brushed Alastor’s hair from his face. “She might be important to this trial. I still don’t know what I’m meant to do yet.”

“There are other doors,” grumbled Alastor. “Let me kill her and we’ll find a better door.”

Vox shook his head in amusement before glancing up at Minx once more. “Look, we had fun, but I’m happy with Al.” His brows furrowed as an idea came to him. “Hey, think you can give me a hint about what I’m supposed to do here?”

Minx scowled in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“This trial. What am I supposed to do?”

Minx raised an eyebrow and Vox made a noise of disappointment. Worth a shot.

“It’s a house of mirrors,” Minx said with a frown and both Alastor and Vox snapped their gazes to her in surprise. “Find the mirrors.”

“Then what?” Vox asked.

She snorted and opened the dishwasher behind the bar, plucking out a glass to dry it. “It’s your trial, Vox. Figure it out yourself.”

Vox and Alastor glanced at each other.

“Can you tell us where Charlie is?” Vox asked slowly.

Minx shook her head and started on the next glass. “I can’t leave this room.” She hesitated. “But I can tell you something isn’t right. There’s been some sort of disturbance. Something dangerous. She’s *distracted*.”

“Distracted?” Alastor asked quickly. “What do you mean?”

She shook her head again. “I don’t know. I can’t leave this room.” She frowned at them both. “You know if you complete these trials, you’ll unleash her, right? She’ll take Hell first and misery and grief and fury will rot it from the core outwards. No creature will be left untouched by her darkness.”

“We have to save Charlie,” Alastor said.

Minx frowned. “Surely there’s another way? You understand that it is our job to stop you from completing these trials?”

Our.

Vox looked around slowly, noticing that the bar had fallen silent and that every patron had turned to them.

Alastor looked around warily. "...What are you?"

"Purgatory," Minx said, drying another glass.

"Why are you trying so hard to destroy us?" Vox asked.

Minx scowled. "We're not. You're looking at it all wrong."

Vox and Alastor stared at her silently and she pulled a face. "You mortals... You were never supposed to come here. These trials weren't designed for *you*."

"Then set us free," Vox suggested. "Stop the trials and let us go. Let Charlie go."

"We're *trying*," said Minx archly. "But *she* won't release you. Her magic is so deeply interwoven with ours that the 'mortal eject' button has stopped working. She keeps finding *loopholes* to bring you all here."

Alastor and Vox's eyes widened.

"You've taken so many souls," Vox whispered. "Demons, angels, humans... Why didn't you help them? Why let them end their own lives?"

Minx slammed the glass on the bartop with a growl. “It wasn’t our fault! We *tried* to set them free! We *tried* to stop the trials! But her magic is *strong*. We are her prison, but with every trial that a soul completes, our defences weaken and she weaves another tendril of magic into our systems. The trials reset after each failure but she gained more power over us and now...” Minx closed her eyes wearily. “Please, stop. It’s our job to keep her locked away. The trials weren’t supposed to keep people *out*. They were designed to keep her *in*. *That’s* why she started bringing mortals here in the first place.”

Alastor licked his lips. “Why are you telling us all of this?”

She looked at him helplessly. “Because it is our job to *protect* the creatures of the universe from her evil and we are growing *weak*. We can no longer send you back to where you came from, but you don’t have to *die*. We can make you a world of your own, however you like it, and you can live out the rest of eternity here. Together.”

“Why not offer that to the other souls that perished here?” Alastor asked with a frown.

“We did. Some have taken the offer and are living happily, protected from her hunger. Others...” Minx’s ears dropped. “Others couldn’t bear the lie. They tried to continue, to complete the trials, but it is our job to *stop* them from releasing her. You must understand; we have no other choice now. We can’t eject you and if you don’t allow us to protect you from her, if you *insist* on finishing the trials, then our only option is to *break* you. We don’t want to. We never want to. But we were built to keep her trapped - it is our primary function.”

Vox and Alastor glanced around the staring patrons.

“*Please*,” Minx begged. “Please stop. We’re growing so weak. She can prevent us from interfering now, from *talking* to you - her power is that great. But we don’t want to hurt you. We don’t want to watch you die.”

“Then help us find Charlie,” Alastor demanded. “We don’t want to release her either.”

Minx hesitated, then her eyes widened and she quickly returned to cleaning glasses as the patrons around them continued whatever they had been doing before they had fallen silent.

The bar filled with noise once more.

Vox and Alastor watched them in confusion before looking back at Minx. She grimaced, keeping her head down and her voice low.

“The Root suspects. We’re sorry. We can’t help your friend.”

“Then you must understand that we have to continue,” Vox said quietly and Minx’s ears fell flat.

“You will destroy all of us if you continue.”

“We have a plan,” Vox said firmly.

“It will fail,” Minx whispered. “It already has.”

Vox and Alastor frowned in confusion before Minx stepped out from behind the bar and wandered towards a rowdy table.

Alastor’s ears perked up. “Vox!” He pointed to the back of the bar, where there were shelves lined with various bottles, backed by-

A mirror!

Vox blinked at their reflections. Alastor’s was ordinary - an accurate image of his demonic self, but Vox’s...

Vox’s was *human*.

His reflection bore sunglasses and an outfit that one of his characters had worn in an action movie he had starred in. He remembered stealing this particular leather jacket from the set once the movie was finished.

He glanced at Alastor through the mirror and noticed the Radio Demon was gazing at his reflection with soft eyes and a gentle smile and a faraway expression.

Vox snickered and leaned in close to his lover's ear. "You have a *crush* on me."

Alastor blinked slowly, lifting his gaze to Vox with that same gentle smile. "Perhaps." He glanced at the reflection again. "You're rather beautiful."

Vox's human cheeks flushed pink and Alastor grinned in amusement. He watched Vox through the mirror and lifted a hand to his right cheekbone, just beneath his blue eye.

"What happened?" he asked quietly. "You had brown eyes as a child."

Vox leaned into Alastor's palm, watching his human self mirror the movement.

"My dad's belt happened," he murmured. "Got struck in the wrong place and somehow lost the pigment."

Alastor frowned. "Can you see through it?"

"I can see in four-K *now*," Vox said with a chuckle. "Advantage of being able to use cameras to watch everyone like a creep." He nuzzled into Alastor's hair. "But, uh... not well. After I got hit, I lost a lot of depth and details. I could see a little but I always struggled."

Alastor scowled and Vox nipped his ear playfully. "Hey, I'm lucky I didn't lose the eye."

His heart fluttered when Alastor pressed against him, nuzzling into his neck as he snaked his arms around Vox.

“It’s a shame we lived through different eras,” Alastor mused. “I think I might have been a rather avid fan of yours.”

Vox grinned, kissing Alastor’s hair. “We absolutely would have been rivals. You’d think me loud and obnoxious and I’d think you old-fashioned and uptight, and we would claim we hated each other but we’d eventually give in to the mounting tension and fuck in some sleazy dive bar one night, and you’d have a crisis because you’ve never thought about men that way before and I’d be thinking I’ve been ruined for every other man - and probably woman - ever because *nothing* would be as satisfying as you.”

Alastor leaned back with an amused grin. “Been daydreaming about that for a while, hm?”

Vox bit back a laugh. “Ever since I saw your human body. You were absolutely my type.”

Alastor laughed quietly and Vox’s expression melted at the genuine sound. He flicked his gaze back to the mirror as Alastor toyed with an antenna and through the reflection, Alastor was playing with his hair instead.

“Mirrors, then,” Vox murmured as he caught Alastor’s other hand and brushed his lips over his knuckles. “Let’s find some mirrors.”

Alastor slid off Vox’s lap and pulled him to his feet. They glanced at Minx as they headed towards the door but her attention was on another customer, so they left the bar wordlessly and slipped into the corridor lined with fun mirrors.

Vox checked his reflection in the nearest one. He looked like his usual television-headed self.

He shrugged and moved to the next door, Alastor trailing after him quietly.

“Scylla,” Alastor read from the neon sign above the door. He side-eyed Vox. “A man-eating monster?”

“Sort of,” grumbled Vox with a frown. “A reporter from my early days in Hell, back when I was trying to make a name for myself. She did everything she could to soil my reputation.” He grinned at Alastor. “You can eat this one if you like.”

Alastor snorted and gestured for Vox to push through the door.

The moment he did, there were camera flashes blinding him and microphones being shoved against his screen. He batted them away irritably.

“Mister Vox, is it true that the reason you left the Brimstone network was because you were fired for grooming your underage assistant?”

Vox scowled at the familiar smooth voice and he squinted through the flashing lights at a beautiful bird-sinner who, despite being female, bore the elegant features and feathers of a peacock rather than those of a peahen. Vox had learned over time that these feathers were somewhat of a personal Hell for Scylla - a constant reminder that she had been born male and, although she was stunning, she hated her demonic appearance.

“No,” huffed Vox. “I left for better pay and hours. And my assistant has been dead for over twenty years, so it wouldn’t be grooming even if I *had* engaged in any sort of affair with her.”

“Then you admit you thought about your teenaged assistant in a sexual manner?”

Vox grabbed a boom mic. “No,” he grunted into it before releasing it and watching the operator stumble.

Vox quickly sidestepped the paparazzi and sighed when Scylla leapt in front of him, recording device outstretched. “Care to comment on the allegations by your ex-boss, accusing you of theft of company equipment?”

Vox’s smile was strained. “Yeah. My boss is a pathological liar. And if he so desperately wants the ballpoint pen back, I’ll gift him a pack of twenty because I’m such a generous guy.”

He pushed past Scylla and glanced around the street. He remembered this day. It was exactly a week after he left the Brimstone Network. He had yet to meet Alastor.

“Is it true you’ve had a job offer from a porn studio, Mister Vox?”

Vox huffed. Valentino’s old boss, Eros, had in fact offered Vox a job after his departure from the Brimstone Network. Vox had read the first three sentences and stuffed the letter in a shredder.

“I’ve not got the ass for porn,” Vox said with an impish smile as he looked around the street carefully. There had to be a mirror somewhere...

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” purred Alastor as he slithered through the crowd and draped himself over Vox’s side.

There were more camera flashes and shouting and microphones jostling for space.

“Are you going to be working for the Radio Demon, Mister Vox?”

“Are you going to split off and create your own network?”

“Does the Radio Demon own your soul?”

“Are you two fucking?”

Alastor blinked slowly, like a smug cat and he grinned at Vox, clearly pleased at the drama he was creating.

“Having fun?” Vox teased beside his ear and there was more excitement, more note scribbling, more pictures snapped of them.

“I’m quite enjoying this trial, yes,” Alastor whispered and he pecked Vox’s screen and laughed at the resulting chaos.

Vox rolled his eyes and slipped an arm around Alastor, guiding him away from the reporters and soon, the sounds of the paparazzi faded away.

“You’ve done well for yourself, Vox.”

They slowed to a halt and turned, noticing that the reporters and their vans had vanished, leaving only Scylla in the largely empty street.

Vox raised an eyebrow. “Thank you.”

“CEO of your own company, good friends, a happy relationship...” She glanced briefly at Alastor before returning her gaze to Vox again. “Those things are difficult to come by in Hell.”

“It hasn’t been without its hardships,” Vox said before he tilted his head. “How have you been, Scylla? I haven’t seen you at any events for a good few years now. What are you up to?”

She smiled wryly, the crown of feathers atop her head laying flat. "I was killed in an Extermination four years ago."

Vox's smile fell. "Oh. I'm sorry."

She shook her head as she approached them. "I'm not really her, Vox. I have her thoughts and feelings, but I'm merely an image of what once was."

"Still," Vox said quietly. "You were a real bitch, but you didn't deserve that."

She smiled. "You wouldn't have said that a year ago. You would have celebrated my death."

Vox remained silent and Scylla chuckled as she came to a halt before him. "You're changing." She flicked her gaze to Alastor. "Both of you."

Vox wasn't sure if that was a good thing.

"Got a mirror?" he asked with a half-hearted smile.

She nodded and pulled a compact out of her pocket. It was small and round and made of brass. There was a dog etched onto its surface. Vox wondered if Scylla had owned a dog in her human life.

"You look at people differently," Scylla said after a moment. "You *notice* things about them now, don't you? Things you were too busy and important to notice before."

Vox met her gaze and she nodded at the compact. "Her name was Dusty."

Vox thumbed the etched surface of the compact before opening it up.

He dropped the mirror and it shattered at his feet. Alastor glanced at him in alarm. Vox took a moment to compose himself.

“What was that?” Vox asked a little breathlessly.

“You,” said Scylla.

“That was not me,” Vox huffed. “That was some sort of greasy basilisk monster.”

“It was you,” Scylla said again. “How I see you.”

“As an enormous basilisk?” Vox asked incredulously. “You ever thought about glasses?”

“As a *snake*,” Scylla corrected. “I’ve always thought of you as a huge sleazeball selling snake oil and lies to your fans. That is what I see when I look at you.”

Vox frowned. “I’m not like that.”

“I think you are,” Scylla said. “Or, well... Scylla thought you were when she was alive.”

“And Minx saw you as a movie star,” Alastor mused quietly before he glanced at Vox. “So the mirrors in the corridor... They must be how you see yourself?”

“Or how *you* see me,” Vox muttered. “How is any of this humiliating though?”

“You’re about to learn what people really think of you,” Alastor said slowly. “How they perceive you.”

“That’s not that bad,” Vox said and Scylla chuckled before turning away from them.

“Not ominous at all,” grumbled Vox before he grinned at Alastor. “Come on. Let’s go see how utterly wonderful and inspiring my exes and enemies think I am.”

Alastor snickered as they headed towards the shop door they had entered through earlier and they found themselves in the corridor lined with silly mirrors. Vox checked his reflection again and smiled when it remained unchanged.

“Onto door three!” Vox announced and he glanced at the neon sign before freezing. “Uh, how about door four instead?” He scurried towards the fourth door, glanced at the sign, and smiled before tugging on the handle.

Locked.

Vox swallowed and turned back to door three with his heart sinking. He managed a sheepish smile. “You know, maybe I should do this one alone?”

Alastor cocked an eyebrow. “What’s so bad about this *Buckshot* fellow, then?”

Vox’s screen tinted pink. “Nothing, really. Just... He’s nothing interesting. You might as well wait out here. Really boring guy. I’ll slip in, find the mirror, and I’ll be out before you can count to ten.”

An amused grin tugged at Alastor’s lips. “You’re hiding something from me. Something *juicy*.”

“Nope!” Vox said enthusiastically as he shuffled over to the door and planted his whole body in front of it to stop Alastor from entering. “Nothing juicy about this guy. Look, you just wait here and-”

“Vox,” purred Alastor, riding a hand up Vox’s chest as he plastered himself against his front. “What are you hiding?”

Vox swallowed, heat creeping up his neck. “...He’s an ex. Sort of. Friends with benefits kind of thing.”

“Worried I’ll get jealous?” Alastor teased and Vox stared at him a fraction too long.

Alastor reared backwards with a laugh. “Seriously? My dear, you realise I was putting on a show with Minx? I hardly feel threatened by any of your past flings.”

“Uh...” said Vox eloquently. “This one... This one’s a little... different.”

Alastor’s smile faltered. “...Did you have feelings for him?”

“It’s... complicated.” Very complicated. Incredibly complicated. Complicated in the *worst* ways imaginable.

Alastor frowned in confusion. “Complicated *how*?”

“As in... I met Buckshot right after you started pushing me away. I was feeling... low,” Vox said awkwardly. “And he was... uh...”

“A sympathetic ear? Easy on the eyes? A way to take your mind off me?” Alastor asked.

“...Not exactly.”

Alastor scowled at him for a moment before shaking his head and allowing his expression to soften. “My dear, I *love* you. Nothing behind this door can change that, I promise.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that,” Vox said with a weak laugh. “I’m worried you’re gonna butt heads. Literally.”

Alastor blinked at him. “What on *Earth* are you talking about?”

Vox pushed the door open.

Alastor stared into an office lined with gold and platinum framed records. He blinked at the sinner staring back at him behind a large desk.

He turned to Vox slowly. “Yes, I see. That’s quite complicated.”

Vox grinned awkwardly and slipped into the office. “Hello, Buckshot.”

“Hello, Vox, darling,” said Buckshot stiltedly as he looked at Alastor in confusion and stood. “Do come in. Would you like a drink? I always keep a bottle of scotch in my desk in case of emergencies.”

“Uh... sure. Sounds good,” Vox managed as he nudged Alastor when he continued to stare silently at the other sinner.

Alastor blinked and plastered on a charming smile. “Yes, that sounds wonderful, my deer fellow-” His eyes widened. “I mean-”

Vox bit back a laugh and both deer demons swivelled to him, fluffy ears pricked towards him.

Buckshot was an elk-demon with a large rack of antlers and mostly black fur with occasional brown highlights. The insides of his ears were white and he dressed like a record-producer from the seventies, because he *was* a record producer from the seventies. He was a little taller than Vox and slightly more muscular, and his dark skin was framed by loose black curls that barely brushed his shoulders. He sported a neat moustache and deep, red eyes, and he spoke with a Texan accent.

“Where are my manners?” Alastor asked, regaining some composure once he took the seat opposite Buckshot’s desk. He offered his hand once the other demon had finished pouring drinks. “I’m-”

“Alastor,” said Buckshot with a gentle frown. “I guessed.” He flicked his gaze to Vox and didn’t shake Alastor’s hand.

Alastor recoiled his arm with a smile of distaste and Vox restrained his amusement when Alastor’s antlers grew exactly an inch taller than Buckshot’s.

“I didn’t think you’d give him a second chance after the Hell he put you through,” Buckshot said bluntly and Alastor’s grin turned deadly.

“Hello! Still here, my good man!”

“Unfortunately.” Buckshot smiled sweetly at Alastor before raking his gaze over Vox’s body. “I hope he’s been treating you well.”

“He has,” Vox said before Alastor could dig trenches into the chair arms with his claws.

Buckshot hummed in a way that suggested he thought otherwise. He suddenly took both of Vox’s hands into his with a charming grin, startling Vox and making Alastor bristle.

“It’s so lovely to see you again, honey,” Buckshot drawled. “Why don’t you tell me what you’ve been up to these past years? You know, I was quite upset when you stopped writing to

me.”

“*Writing to you?*” Alastor choked out and Vox flashed him a sheepish smile.

“We had quite the romantic affair,” purred Buckshot. “Didn’t he tell you?”

“No,” said Alastor, smile sharp. “In fact, he didn’t mention you even once. You mustn’t have been all that memorable.”

Buckshot’s ears lowered for a second before he scowled at Alastor. “Well, he certainly had a lot to say about *you*. All of it bad.”

“Now, that’s hardly true,” Vox protested, instinctively clamping a hand on Alastor’s shoulder to stop him from leaping out of his seat as he slid his other hand from Buckshot’s grip. “We were going through a rough patch, that’s all. Al was facing a lot and my feelings were... complicated.”

“They weren’t complicated to me,” Buckshot sniffed. “He was pretty with an awful personality, so you found someone prettier with a great personality. I don’t think it’s complicated at all.” He glanced at Vox with a sad smile. “I just don’t understand why you stopped seeing me.”

“Because why would he have a cheap knock-off when he could have the real thing?” Alastor growled, muscles tensed for a fight.

“Fuck you,” snapped Buckshot. “At least I treated him well. At least I could give him the things he wanted.”

“But not what he needed,” Alastor growled viciously.

Vox watched Buckshot warily, unease tugging at his gut. “Relax, Alastor,” Vox muttered as Alastor’s ears flattened in anger. Reluctantly, Alastor backed down at Vox’s command.

“I’ve missed you all these years,” Buckshot said softly as he turned to Vox, fully ignoring Alastor. He smiled playfully. “We had such fun together, didn’t we?”

“We did,” Vox muttered, pretending to avert his gaze in embarrassment when really he was looking for a mirror. *There, by the window.* There was a full length mirror.

He took Alastor’s hand, squeezing it reassuringly, and Alastor squeezed back, relaxing a fraction further.

“Vox, darling,” Buckshot drawled. “Come back to me. We worked so well together. You don’t need this smiling *freak* - he won’t make you happy, not like I did. I can take care of you. Give you anything you desire.”

Vox arched an eyebrow. “...Buck, I *am* happy. I love Alastor dearly. He takes care of me.”

Buckshot’s hand tightened around his glass and Vox’s gaze was quickly drawn to it. There was a soft *crack* and Vox felt his heart beginning to race.

“Why did you stop writing, Vox?” Buckshot asked gently. “You broke my heart. I didn’t even get a goodbye kiss.”

“I was using you because you looked like Alastor. It wasn’t fair to you.” It was only half the truth but Vox didn’t like the look of the second crack that had appeared in the glass.

“I knew that. I didn’t care about that. You know I didn’t,” Buckshot said with a warm smile.

“You deserve better,” Vox said lightly, watching as Buckshot placed his open palm on the desk between them in invitation.

“I want you,” Buckshot said, something old and familiar in his tone - something that made Vox’s smile falter for a fraction of a second as he sat slightly straighter.

“Too bad, chum!” Alastor chirped, oblivious to Vox’s sharp warning glance. “I’m afraid Vox is already taken!” He wrapped an arm around Vox’s shoulders, fingers loosely curling around Vox’s bicep.

Suddenly, Buckshot’s antlers elongated and his pupils took the shape of spinning records as he planted his hands on the desk and surged towards Alastor with a snarl, antlers lowered.

Alastor yelped as the tips of the impressive antlers sliced through his face and Vox bounced to his feet quickly, trying to pull Alastor out of Buckshot’s reach, but Alastor snarled, dials in his eyes as he instinctively lowered his head and locked antlers with the elk-demon.

“Alastor, stop!” Vox said desperately as he grabbed Alastor’s arm and tried to unlock the pair, but Buckshot suddenly gripped the back of Alastor’s head, smashed his scotch glass against the edge of the desk, and drove the shattered remains into Alastor’s *eye*.

“Fuck!” Alastor hissed as he jerked backwards, but their antlers were still tied together and Buckshot had a tight grip on the back of his head, so he didn’t get very far before Buckshot dragged him hard against the desk and carved the glass through his cheek.

Alastor clawed viciously at his face and Vox launched across the desk with a small shard of glass, plunging it into Buckshot’s shoulder and eliciting an animalistic noise of pain.

“Get the fuck off him!” Vox snarled and Buckshot ground his teeth together before bodily hauling Alastor across the desk and pinning him up against the wall behind it, their antlers now firmly stuck.

“He’s *mine*,” Buckshot growled, hand closing around Alastor’s throat and, pinned like this, it was easy to see how much *bigger* Buckshot was compared to Alastor. Alastor’s shoes barely

brushed the floor as he struggled and after a moment of attempting to summon his shadows without any luck, Alastor kicked hard at Buckshot's knees.

Buckshot grunted and Vox raced over, placing a hand on the elk-demon's shoulder and summoning a charge.

Except nothing happened and Buckshot made a terrible noise, like a needle scratching a record but ten times louder, and both Alastor and Vox winced and shied away from the sound.

Buckshot jerked, slamming Alastor's head hard against the wall and Alastor made a pained noise before he laid his palms flat against the wall and kicked both feet into Buckshot's stomach.

Buckshot groaned and staggered backwards, dragging Alastor with him, and Alastor rammed him against the desk, bending his back over it.

With a snarl of frustration, Buckshot wrapped his legs around Alastor's hips and Alastor collapsed on top of him as the elk-demon raked his claws down Alastor's back. With a growl, Alastor dug his own claws into Buckshot's soft belly and into the muscles of his arm.

"Stop!" Vox snapped. "Stop!"

Both deer demons bared their teeth at each other as they panted, antlers locked and claws biting deeper into scarred flesh.

Vox shuffled over to them and eased their antlers apart.

"Let go of each other," Vox demanded.

They glowered at each other - Alastor with only one functional eye.

“Let go!” Vox snapped.

Alastor slowly loosened his grip, but Buckshot grasped a fragment of broken glass and drove it into Alastor’s spine.

Arching, Alastor cried out in agony and Buckshot lowered his antlers and aimed for Alastor’s throat, but Vox quickly gripped one, grimacing when a prong sliced his hand open, and he slammed Buckshot’s head against the desk.

Alastor immediately interlocked their antlers once more but Buckshot impaled his spine again with the shard and Alastor crumpled before Buckshot flipped their positions and smashed Alastor’s spine against the desk - with the shard still protruding from it.

Alastor screamed.

Vox snatched a long fragment of glass and plunged it deep into Buckshot’s neck. Buckshot made another animalistic noise of agony as blood spurted from the wound and he blindly grabbed Vox’s antennae and rammed his face against the edge of the desk, cracking his screen.

Alastor kicked out desperately, every movement clear agony for him, and he twisted and rolled his head in every direction, attempting to unlock their antlers.

There was a great *crack* and a bolt of pain shot through Alastor’s skull before one of his antlers clattered to the desk and Alastor clawed at Buckshot’s face and kicked hard at his tender stomach. Buckshot stumbled and Alastor attempted to push away from the desk only to collapse to his knees with a cry of agony.

“Turns out the Great Radio Demon isn’t so *great*,” Buckshot snarled as he pulled the shard of glass from his neck and gripped Alastor’s hair painfully tight.

Vox leapt onto his back with a battlecry, clawing and biting and kicking at him in a frantic attempt to distract him from Alastor.

“Get the fuck away from him!” Vox roared and his eyes went wide with surprise when Buckshot suddenly grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against the desk before smashing his antlers straight through Vox’s screen.

Vox’s world went dark.

“Stupid bitch,” hissed Buckshot. “Thought I made you a list of people you can and can’t talk to? You’re not allowed to talk to Alastor - you *know* that. Now look at what you’ve made me do.”

Vox clawed blindly at Buckshot and Buckshot pinned his wrists to the desk. “Now I’ll have to fucking punish you. Are you happy? Do you think I *like* punishing you? Damn it, Vox, predators are supposed to be *smart*. ”

He threw Vox onto the floor and Vox barely managed to sit upright before a huge hoof stomped between his legs.

He cried out and quickly covered himself with his hands, but Buckshot gripped his wrists, yanking him awkwardly off the floor before stomping on his crotch over and over until Vox was begging for mercy.

“Maybe now you’ll stop throwing yourself at every sinner who looks at you,” growled Buckshot as he kicked Vox hard enough to crack his pelvis.

Vox howled and suddenly, there was a furious snarl from Alastor and a wet choking noise from Buckshot followed by a heavy *thud*.

There was a second *thud* and an agonised whimper from Alastor.

“Al?” Vox asked as he trembled.

“He’s dead,” Alastor croaked. “Shit, I think he’s severed my spinal cord.”

With some difficulty, and with a burning pelvis, Vox rolled onto his hands and knees and crawled towards Alastor’s voice.

“Let’s get out of here,” Vox muttered as he slid his arms carefully beneath Alastor and held him bridal-style even as his pelvis protested.

“The mirror,” Alastor protested.

“I can’t fucking see, Alastor,” Vox snapped before he winced and held Alastor more securely to his chest. “I’m sorry. There’s just... more important things than that right now. We need to get you some help. Maybe if we go back to door two, we can find a hospital in Pentagon City.”

Alastor tightened his grip on Vox, falling silent as he nodded against his chest.

“You’ll have to guide me. I can’t see where I’m going,” Vox murmured.

“There’s a desk in front of you. Move a foot to the right and head straight.”

Vox waddled towards the door, following Alastor’s instructions, but when they made it into the corridor, Vox’s pain disappeared and his screen instantly repaired itself. He glanced down at Alastor, pleased to see two eyes staring back at him rather than one.

“Oh!” Alastor said and when Vox put him down, he stretched out his back and touched his tiny antlers, neither one damaged.

Vox glanced through the open door curiously and Alastor followed him inside.

Buckshot lay sprawled on the floor, impaled by Alastor's broken antler from back to chest. Blood pooled slowly around him.

When Vox glanced at Alastor, the deer-demon's ears were flat, eyes narrowed, and teeth bared as he glowered at his dead rival.

Vox caught Alastor's chin and kissed him roughly and Alastor pushed Vox against the wall with a soft growl.

"I'm yours, Al," Vox whispered against his lips.

"Damn right you are," Alastor breathed as he nipped Vox's lip and fisted his shirt. "You can talk to whomever you like as long as you come home to me at the end of the day. As long as I'm the only one who gets to touch you like this."

Vox shivered. *Home*. He wrapped an arm around Alastor's waist and clutched his hair.

"You're so fucking beautiful when you're fighting for me," Vox hissed. "Shit, I've never seen you fight like that. No magic, just antlers and claws and hooves."

Alastor's ears drooped. "He would have won if you hadn't interfered. He was bigger. *Stronger*." He sounded *ashamed*.

"You fucking killed him, Alastor," Vox growled against his lover's lips. "And you did it to protect me. Such a good buck. *My* buck."

Alastor's ears perked up and Vox slipped a hand into his trousers to pet his wiggling tail. Alastor released a shaky breath and leaned their heads together, pulsing a burst of affectionate static between them. Then he caught Vox's hand and led him towards the mirror.

Vox nipped his jaw in promise before they turned to the mirror.

Vox's face fell as Alastor's soured with fury.

"...That's all he saw me as?" Vox whispered as he stared at his reflection. "I knew there were problems, but I thought..." He trailed off, staring numbly at himself.

In the mirror he was naked, with a thick, pronged collar that read *'Property of Buckshot. Please return if found.'* There were finger- and hand-shaped bruises all over his body and his skin was filled with tattoos of the word 'Property'. In the mirror, his dick was hard, and thick, white fluid dribbled down his thighs and from between his lips, and his nipples were swollen.

He looked like a used whore.

Alastor placed a hand on his waist and Vox jerked out of his hold, looking away angrily as he wrapped his arms around himself.

"Vox, that isn't you. That's just how one psychotic asshole saw you," Alastor tried gently.

"I actually fucking liked him, y'know?" Vox growled. "It took him a while to start throwing me around and before that... I genuinely started to like him. He was like you in *so* many ways and I thought, since I couldn't have you..." Vox shrank in on himself, feeling foolish.

"His opinion doesn't matter, my dear--"

"Of course it fucking matters!" Vox snapped, startling Alastor. "Because even when I'm *trying* to mean something to someone, I'm still worthless! Pathetic! What kind of Overlord

does that make me? If *this* is how people actually see me, then that means I've never had any sort of respect. What kind of reputation do I have? Because it certainly isn't the one I'm trying to craft, is it?"

Alastor frowned. "You're extremely successful. One of the most powerful Overlords in Hell and you have a technological empire at your fingertips - one *you* have created. Why does it matter what people think of you? Have your achievements not proved your worth? Your strength? Your intelligence."

"Says the man who has carefully crafted his reputation into *exactly* what he wants it to be," said Vox incredulously. "People look at you and they're afraid. Or at the very least, they respect you for your powers and history. People look at me and they see... *that*." Vox gestured angrily to the mirror.

"My reputation is the reason I'm on this damn chain!" Alastor snapped and Vox glanced at him with wide eyes.

Alastor squared his jaw. "If I hadn't been so concerned with how other people saw me, with feeling like *prey*, I would never have made a deal that got me *trapped*. I would never have involved you in this mess. Valentino wouldn't have found out about me being *raped*, and now all of Hell knows and I-" He cut himself off and closed his eyes for a moment before frowning at Vox tiredly. "It doesn't matter how these people think of you - what matters is the opinion of those who *care* about you."

"This," said Vox as he gestured to the mirror, "is a weakness. That's how the freaks of Hell will see it, how they'll see *me*. Reputation is *everything*, Alastor, because if they sense weakness, where does that leave me? What will they do to me if they think *this* is all I am? A piece of property to be owned and used and *fucked* like some common whore?" He gestured viciously to the dead Buckshot. "Hunted like a fucking de-"

He clamped his mouth shut, eyes wide.

Alastor's ears were flat, hurt clear on his face.

Vox swallowed. "...Al, I didn't mean that."

It was like watching Alastor put on a mask. His strained smile crept wider, eyes bright and dangerous as he held his head higher even though his ears were still low. "Oh, I'm quite certain you did, old pal! But what would I know? It isn't as though I've been struggling with that exact *weakness* for the past... hm... *century*? Not at all! You're worried about *one* sinner viewing you like prey, but I *am* prey. Prey that has been caught once before and has been *running* ever since, but sure - what would I know about being owned and used and *fucked* like some common whore?"

Vox grimaced. "Al-"

"You've said quite enough," Alastor interrupted tersely. "Perhaps we should move on from this room." He turned smartly and marched towards the door.

Vox caught his wrist and Alastor shot him a filthy look.

"I'm sorry," Vox sighed. "I just... My reputation means a lot to me."

Alastor withdrew his arm from Vox's grip with a scowl. "This is *Hell*, Vox. *Respect* is another word for *fear*. *Admiration* is another word for *envy*." He gestured to Buckshot. "Love and affection barely exist but lust and possessiveness are around every corner. These sinners will always see you as property or a whore because they see *everyone* as property or a whore. That's how Hell works. You'll always be prey to someone, no matter how important or successful or dangerous your reputation." Alastor averted his gaze. "Be grateful you haven't been caught," he murmured bitterly.

Guilt flooded Vox's chest and his arms fell to his sides limply. "I'm a jackass," he said softly and Alastor looked up at him with a small frown.

"You are."

Vox huffed a laugh and tentatively reached for an ear. Alastor allowed it and Vox blew out a breath. “I forget that *this*, ” he gestured between them both, “isn’t normal in Hell. You’re so good to me, you take care of me so well, that I forget that I’m surrounded by *demons*, not humans. I forget that people see each other as objects to be won and traded or destroyed. I forget how *cheap* life is in Hell. How little it means to everyone. I forget the sort of people who end up in Hell - the rapists and murderers and paedophiles - the types of people who don’t see people as, well, *people*.”

Vox sneakily pulled Alastor closer and the Radio Demon gave him a stern look before giving in and letting himself be held.

“I’m sorry,” Vox whispered as he carded his fingers through Alastor’s hair. “I was careless. I didn’t think.”

Alastor frowned at the mirror, raking his gaze over Vox’s reflection. “You wear your heart on your sleeve and wonder why you get hurt by other people.”

“Because I feel safe with you,” Vox said gently. “Because I forget that not everyone is like you. Because you always try so hard to protect me and my exposed heart and I forget that other people want to destroy it.”

Finally, Alastor nuzzled into Vox’s neck. “Which is exactly why their opinions don’t matter. They could spin the sweetest lies for you, only to stab you in the back when it suits them. Why should you care what they think? They’re violent, arrogant, narcissistic idiots; the lot of them. And they *don’t know you*.”

Vox glanced over at the dead Buckshot, alone and lying in a pool of his own blood. He wondered if anyone would miss the real Buckshot if he died. He remembered Buckshot being charming and popular, but did he actually have any *friends*?

He stroked Alastor’s flattened ear and gazed at him for a long moment. Vox would be missed. He would be *mourned*. Not just by Alastor, but by Rosie and Velvette too. Perhaps once they got out of Purgatory, he could build a few more friendships within the hotel?

“Vox?”

Vox blinked out of his musings and cupped Alastor’s cheek tenderly. “You’re right. Of course you’re right. And for the record, you and me? We’re a team.” He tugged Alastor flush against him by the waist. “No one will ever catch you again, Al. I promise. I won’t let them.”

Alastor’s ears stood upright as his smile softened.

Vox jerked a thumb over his shoulder at Buckshot. “And if anyone tries to catch either of us, we’ll just fucking kill them.” He grinned and Alastor barked out a laugh and kissed Vox’s screen chastely before dragging him towards the door.

“Come, my love. Let’s keep moving.”

They passed the mirrors in the corridor and Vox paused when he noticed the thick dog collar in his reflection. He fingered his throat, eyes wide in surprise as he read the silver tag.

Property of...

The name was blank and Vox dropped his arm limply to his side.

Alastor watched him worriedly. “...Vox-”

“It’s fine,” Vox muttered before he shuffled to door number four.

Salvadore.

“Who’s this fellow?” Alastor asked as Vox stared at the handle, taking a moment to compose himself.

“My old agent. He’s a dick but we got on pretty well.”

Alastor stared at him, frowning slightly and Vox refused to meet his gaze. “I’m *fine*,” Vox grumbled before pushing inside.

“Vox! My highest achiever!” said a man with an upper class accent.

Vox plastered on a false smile - as false as the one the gecko-demon before him was wearing. “Sal! It’s been a while.”

“It certainly has, old friend! Please, take a seat. Tell me how you’ve been.”

Vox wandered deeper into the familiar office, Alastor trailing silently after him. There was a large mirrored wall behind Salvadore’s desk and as Vox neared the offered seat, he slowed to a halt, scowling at his reflection.

There were wires and pipes and chunks of metal in place of his limbs, and notes and coins oozed out of every crack in his body. His smile was cartoonishly wide and grotesque, and what remained of his distorted, inhuman body was covered in dog tags and tattoos and burned-on cattle brands, each bearing the words ‘*Property of Salvadore*’.

Vox stilled before he reached the seat, turned silently on his heel, and marched out of the office.

Alastor shut door four behind them as Vox closed his eyes.

“Money-making machine,” Vox muttered. “I was his money-making machine. He didn’t even see me as a person.”

His stomach rolled and he glanced at his reflection in one of the silly mirrors. He grimaced at the new wires winding around his neck and arms and the ink sprawling across his screen that read '*Property of...*'

Alastor stared at him through the mirror. "You are more than that. You know that, Vox."

Vox turned away from the mirror and trudged to door number five without a word.

They passed through fifteen doors in total, each revealing another character from Vox's past and each mirror displaying their perception of him. Once they returned from door fifteen, Vox could barely look at his reflection in the corridor mirrors.

He was more machine than person, with the words '*Property of...*' tattooed and scribbled and tagged and *burned* into every inch of his body. Wires snaked around what little was left of his limbs and his naked skin was littered with bruises and *fluids*, and his screen no longer bore a face - merely a collection of binary codes.

He closed his eyes and slid down the wall slowly.

A weight settled in his lap and Alastor peppered his screen with sweet kisses. Vox reached for him silently, curling his fingers around his hips in search of comfort.

"You are more than this, my dear," Alastor whispered.

"What if I'm not?" Vox asked softly. "If this is how so many people see me..."

"It doesn't matter what they think," Alastor murmured as he toyed with Vox's antennae.

"If a book is given to a hundred people," muttered Vox, "and ninety-nine of them use it as a doorstep, then that means it is an efficient doorstep and a poor novel."

“And to that one person who actually opened it,” Alastor said as he thumbed Vox’s lower lip, “it is the most magnificent, life-changing story they have ever read. In fact, they are so deeply enamoured with the book that they share it with their closest friends and they discuss every line in detail. They admire the book for the range of emotions it invokes from its small circle of dedicated readers, and they learn a lot from the book. It teaches them things they have never thought about before, gives them experiences they have never dreamed of. And they are grateful for the book. They love the book dearly. So much so, in fact, that they wear out their copy and have to find ways of binding it and keeping it together, because it isn’t a book that can be replaced and they will cherish their favourite book, no matter how broken or damaged it is.”

Something warm and fond bubbled up in Vox’s chest amidst all the nausea and hollowness. He cracked an eye open to smile weakly at Alastor.

“Just to make sure, the book is me, right?”

Alastor barked out a laugh and settled more comfortably onto Vox before nuzzling his screen.

“Yes, darling. The book is you. The problem with this reflection of yours is that it has been created by people who are *illiterate*.”

Vox relaxed and wrapped an arm around Alastor’s waist as he threaded his other fingers through the Radio Demon’s hair.

“Think you can fix that?” Vox asked quietly, staring at his reflection over Alastor’s shoulder.

Alastor glanced back at the reflection for a long moment, studying the unrecognisable creature behind the glass. Then, he pulled Vox to his feet and slipped behind him, gaze trained on the mirror as he traced his fingers over wires and protrusions of metal that weren’t really there.

Vox watched curiously as Alastor frowned and tilted his head. He smoothed his fingers over the words branded into Vox's bare chest before pressing a long, slow kiss to Vox's shoulder.

"Firstly, the only person you belong to is me," Alastor murmured against his shoulder. "But I would never desecrate your body like this, so get rid of the brands and tattoos and that ridiculous ink on your screen. I keep my belongings in excellent condition."

He fingered the dog collar in Vox's reflection. "Hm... I like this, however. Make it red leather and give it a gold tag so everyone knows that you're mine."

Vox shivered and watched in surprise as his reflection shifted and changed; the tattoos and brands and ink fading away as the collar around his neck grew thicker and expensive-looking. The tag glittered under the funhouse lights.

Property of Alastor. Return if found.

Vox blinked, heat pooling in his belly.

Alastor hummed in approval before narrowing his eyes and tapping on the edge of Vox's screen.

"I want to see that expressive face of yours. These silly numbers mean nothing to me."

The binary code cleared and Vox's face popped back onto his screen. He smiled gratefully at Alastor through the mirror and Alastor's hands splayed possessively over his chest and stomach.

"Much better," he purred as he fingered the chunks of metal and wires that distorted Vox's body. "Where are those pretty lights of yours? And the circuit tracks that glow under my touch? You know how much I adore them. You know how much I adore touching you, how entranced I am by your clever body. Remove these useless cables and this bulky metal so I can *see* you, Vox. I want to see my pretty picturebox."

Vox's screen tinged pink as the wires and metal in the mirror fell away to reveal his naked body, with every track glowing cyan and the lights on his hips twinkling brighter than usual.

Alastor's smile grew wide with pleasure as he traced a finger over a long track. "There you are," he whispered before he dipped his head to the back of Vox's neck and kissed him softly.

He trailed a hand down Vox's arm to his palm and Vox watched through the mirror at the mess of cables wound tightly around his arms and fingers.

"I love your hands," Alastor murmured against his neck. "I love how big they are. How surprisingly *warm* they are when you wrap them around my waist. I love when you use your claws to scratch my ears. I love the feeling of your long fingers threading through my hair and I love when you fist my hair in desperation."

The cables began to unravel.

"I love when you hold me," Alastor continued, tightening his grip on Vox as he toyed with Vox's fingers. "I love when your claws tease at my tail. I love how gentle your fingers can be when sliding so reverently over my skin and I love how firm they can be when pushing my thighs apart so you can dip your head between my legs."

Alastor tangled their fingers together as the cables fell away.

"I love how my cock nestles so perfectly into your palm," Alastor breathed against the back of Vox's screen. "Like we were made for each other."

Vox's breaths trembled as he looked at himself in the mirror - at his glowing skin and his hard cock and the hearts in his digital eyes and the lack of wires and excess metal.

Alastor smirked at his reflection with half-lidded eyes. He brushed a finger over the golden tag at Vox's neck - the only garment he was wearing.

"This is what you are, my dear. This is how you should see yourself. Look how lovely you are. You aren't a mere machine. You aren't a whore or a punching bag for others' entertainment. You aren't property or a simple object to be coveted."

Vox touched the collar at his neck. His fingers grasped his bowtie but his reflected image showed him fingering the dog tag. "I'm *your* property."

"Only when you want to be," Alastor said gently. "You can remove a collar whenever you like. You're *choosing* to wear that collar, my dear."

Vox blinked, a smile pulling slowly at his lips. Alastor's mark wasn't a painful cattle brand or a permanent tattoo. It was a gift.

"I think," Vox said quietly, "that I'd quite like you to give me a real collar like this one day."

Alastor's eyes flashed with interest as he wrapped his arms possessively around Vox. "Oh? Why's that?"

"I... like how it looks," Vox confessed. "I like the idea of choosing to wear it whenever I feel like it. I like the colour and your name engraved in gold, and I like-" He cut himself off and swallowed thickly and Alastor growled and curled a hand loosely around his throat.

"You like?" he purred.

Vox stared at his reflection with wide eyes and shaky breaths. He stared at Alastor's fingers curled delicately around his neck and the dog tag glinting just beneath.

“I like that you give me a choice,” Vox whimpered. “I like that you *want* to possess me, but that you let me decide whether to allow you to.”

“And will you?” Alastor breathed.

Vox whirled around, gripping Alastor’s wrists and pinning him against the wall as his chest burned with *want*.

“That depends,” he whispered. “Would you choose to be mine?”

“Yes,” Alastor said without hesitation, eyes wide and ears swivelled fully towards Vox. “Always. Forever. I *want* to be yours.”

“Then yes,” breathed Vox before he captured Alastor’s lips, slow and deep and heated.

When they parted, Alastor stared hungrily at Vox. “I’ll get you a collar,” he growled.

Vox grinned and peeled Alastor off the wall before slipping a hand into his trousers and gripping his tail. Alastor straightened for a moment then pressed eagerly into Vox’s side.

“So *responsive*, ” Vox teased and Alastor shot him a downright *sinful* look.

“I should have bent you over Buckshot’s desk and made you watch me fuck you in the mirror.”

Vox choked in surprise and Alastor cackled before dragging him towards door sixteen.

They fell silent.

Vox took a step backwards, then another.

Alastor caught his waist.

“You have to face him,” he murmured.

Vox shook his head. “I don’t know if I can.”

“It isn’t really him, remember? Just Purgatory’s version of him.”

The door opened and Valentino *stepped into the corridor*.

Alastor and Vox stared at him with wide eyes and Valentino crossed his arms.

“Oh, I’m quite real, amorcito.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally got this chapter out! I promise I'll reply to all your comments, I've just been a bit busy!

Anyway, hope you enjoyed a bit of action and some mystery... ;)

Chapter 59: Humiliation - Pt. II

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Valentino scowled at them both before his gaze drifted to a mirror behind Vox. He narrowed his eyes at the image of Vox reflected within it - at the red collar and glowing skin and Alastor's palm resting reassuringly around his waist.

"Val?" Vox breathed, heart simultaneously sinking and aching.

"Vox," Valentino said coldly before he bared his teeth at Alastor. "*Alastor.*"

Alastor said nothing, merely stared in surprise at the moth-demon.

Valentino glanced down the corridor, at the mirrors and doors lining its walls. "I take it this is Vox's trial? Clever of her to slide me into it. Purgatory is efficient at stopping her interferences but this? Making me part of your trial?" Valentino smirked without much humour. "Smart."

Vox and Alastor shared a silent glance before Vox found his voice. "What are you doing here, Val?"

Valentino's smirk widened into a grin. "You owe me a soul, amorcito."

Vox stiffened and Alastor's grip on his waist tightened.

“Specifically *your* soul,” Valentino purred. “You must be nearing the end of the trials.”

Pulse racing, Vox stared at Valentino with a pleading gaze. “Val, please don’t do this. I know I’ve hurt you. I fucked up - we *both* did,” he said as he gestured to Alastor. “But you don’t need to own my soul to help us fix things. Once we get out of here-”

“*Fix things?*” Valentino scoffed. “There’s nothing to *fix*. You’ve made your choice, Vox. You chose Alastor. You *always* choose Alastor.” He bared his teeth. “But this time, I’m not going to let you walk all over me. I’m *tired* of being your punching bag. Alastor can have your broken, worthless little heart - I want something of value. Think of it as reimbursement for all the *shit* you’ve put me through.”

“Revenge?” Vox asked quietly. “You want... revenge?”

Valentino threw his wings out intimidatingly as he clenched his fists. “I want you to fucking *suffer*, you ungrateful piece of shit! The way you made me suffer!”

Vox cast his mind back to the Fury trial, to the younger Valentino that had embraced him and Alastor with happy squeaks of relief, to the Valentino that had fallen to his knees at Vox’s feet as he sobbed over how he was hurting Vox and how he wanted things to go back to the way they had once been.

That Valentino was still in there somewhere.

Right?

He held his hands up placatingly. “I... I get it. I hurt you. I broke you because I didn’t listen. I *should* have listened, Val. You were scared and traumatised and I couldn’t see it because I was too wrapped up with my own problems. But I could have helped you. I *should* have helped you.”

“We both should have,” Alastor offered quietly and Valentino blinked at them, hesitating for a moment, before he gritted his teeth once more.

“You’re a couple of manipulative bastards,” he spat as he advanced on them. “I won’t fall for your lies again.” He gripped Vox by his shirt and leaned in close. “The things I’m going to do to you...”

Alastor’s antlers grew an inch taller and Vox shot him a sharp look before frowning at Valentino. “I’m sorry, Val. I’m sorry for ignoring you, for treating you like shit, for making you feel *worthless*. I’m sorry for using you and belittling you and making you feel second best to Alastor. I’m sorry for helping you to become the exact thing you *never* wanted to become and I...” He glanced between Alastor and Valentino. “And I’m sorry for pitting you two against each other. For making you both feel that you had to compete. I never wanted that. I cared about you both so much and I should have brought you together, not driven you further apart.”

Alastor’s ears lowered but Valentino snarled at Vox and smashed his head through the mirror behind him.

Vox cursed as a crack streaked through his screen and he covered his face to protect himself as Valentino grabbed a broken shard of mirror.

Alastor ploughed into Valentino and the two tumbled to the floor, clawing and kicking at one another before Alastor sprung to his feet and placed himself in front of Vox with a vicious grin.

Valentino dragged himself to his feet, claw marks raking down his left cheek.

“You never fucking cared about me!” Valentino snarled as he glowered at Vox. “You used me! Manipulated me! And then you set your fucking *mutt* on me!” He glared at Alastor before returning his ire to Vox. “So now I get to use you. You want a distraction? Someone to fuck the heartache out of you?” He smiled darkly. “Oh, Voxy, when you’re on *my* chain, I’ll have you working every hour of the night on my set. You’ll be my star actor. I’ll have you taking twenty guys before lunch. I’ll have shots of you begging and crying from every angle. I’ll have them dismantle you as they fuck you. I’ll have them fuck your face so hard you’ll need a new screen *every night*. I’ll have them cut wires to paralyse you.”

Alastor bristled, claws sharpening, and Valentino bared his teeth at the Radio Demon. “And when you’re broken and bleeding and every inch of you burns with agony, maybe I’ll be generous enough to let Alastor have you once *I’ve* finished fucking your pathetic ass.”

With a growl, Alastor lunged for Valentino again, but Vox caught him by the waist and tugged him against his chest. His eyes were dials and his antlers were huge and sharp and the stitches at his mouth began to flicker into existence with his outrage.

“He’s hurting,” Vox whispered beside Alastor’s ear.

“He will be,” Alastor hissed. “Let me go.”

Vox secured his grip on his furious lover. “Look at him, Al. He’s angry and upset and he’s saying all that shit to make us feel the way he does.”

“It’s working,” growled Alastor. “Let me go, Vox.”

“Yes, let him go, Voxy,” scoffed Valentino as he stalked towards them. “Let’s see how long it takes for him to abandon you this time. How quickly will he freeze when I stick my tongue down his throat? How much will he cry when I pin him to floor and rip his fucking clothes off?”

Alastor stiffened and Vox wrapped both arms around him protectively as he leaned his cracked screen carefully against the back of Alastor’s head.

“He isn’t going to do any of that,” Vox whispered. “He’s hurting, Al. He needs help. Remember the Fury trial? Remember that terrified moth-demon who needed our help and we *failed* to notice? Well, this is our last chance to do what we should have done all those decades ago.”

Alastor fell quiet, glowering at Valentino as one ear turned to Vox, listening.

“He’s part of my trial,” Vox whispered. “Maybe both of our trials. Either way, attacking him isn’t the answer. For once, we have to *listen* to him.”

Alastor’s smile was thin-lipped and Vox brushed his lips against Alastor’s hair. “I won’t let him touch you, I promise.”

“He seems more interested in what he can do to you, Vox,” muttered Alastor.

“He’s just blowing smoke,” mumbled Vox before Valentino flared his wings again.

“You think you’re being clever by muttering to each other?” Valentino snarled. “You think it’ll get under my skin? Ha! I’m not the one about to die in this wretched dump! I’m not the one about to give up my soul to someone I thought *beneath me*. ”

Vox frowned. “I don’t think you’re beneath me, Val.”

“Liar!” Valentino roared. “You’ve always thought yourself better than me, more powerful than me.” He shook his head angrily. “But then you went and settled for *Alastor*? The shit you scrape from the bottom of the barrel? He can’t give you *half* of what I could have given you and you *still* chose him. He’s only powerful because he made a *deal*. Why can’t you see how fucking weak he is? How afraid? He’ll *never* be able to give himself to you. He’ll *never* be able to face his past.”

Valentino ground his teeth together. “But *I* did. Why can’t you see how much stronger I am than him? I could have given you *everything*. ”

Vox stroked his thumb over Alastor’s stomach as he held him. “It isn’t a competition, Val.” He pulled a face. “And it isn’t about *sex*. That doesn’t matter. I *trust* Alastor. He gives me exactly what I need; he doesn’t just blindly give me what I ask for, and he apologises when he hurts me and doesn’t lash out when I hurt him, and-” Vox squeezed Alastor gently. “And

it's more than that. I feel *safe* with Alastor. He's there when I need him and he gives me another chance even when I don't deserve one. He makes me laugh and roll my eyes and he dances with me and talks to me about everything and nothing, and... and I love him. I've loved him for a long, long time."

He felt Alastor relax into his hold.

Valentino's gaze was glassy. "But *I* could have given you those things too," he said angrily.

"I know," Vox said quietly.

Valentino's nails bit into his palms. "Then why couldn't you have loved me instead?"

"Because I was *grieving*," Vox said gently. "When I lost Alastor, my whole world fell apart. I lost my best friend. I lost a piece of myself, Val. I couldn't love you because I couldn't love *anything*."

"You didn't give him time," Alastor said as he laid a hand over Vox's. "And when he finally made himself vulnerable in front of you, you humiliated him. Made him feel like a machine, like something less than a person. And then you *cheated* on him - you betrayed his trust."

"He was so cold to me," Valentino snapped. "He turned into an asshole when he came back from Purgatory! He wasn't the Vox I remembered."

"He was *traumatised*," Alastor growled. "He faced the trials alone and he needed support."

"Which I *tried* to give to him! But he pushed me away!"

"Then you should have tried harder!" Alastor snarled before he grimaced. "We both should have."

Valentino scowled as Vox kissed Alastor's ear. "We were all a bit broken and we hurt each other to protect ourselves." Vox glanced at Valentino with a sad smile. "But we can fix it. We can learn to do better." He slowly slid out from behind Alastor and offered his hand to Valentino. "We've got to learn how to forgive each other."

"Right, sure. Forgive the *freak* that *murdered* me!" Valentino hissed. "Why not?"

"You dismembered him and soldered a *bomb* to his brain," Alastor growled, fists clenched. "You ignored his pleas for you to *stop*. You treated him like a machine. You attacked Velvette and you *rape* Angel and-"

"Alastor," Vox said quietly and Alastor fell silent for a moment, sharing a strained look with his lover. "Let it go."

Alastor swallowed and shook his head. "I *can't*."

"You've already done it once," Vox reminded.

Alastor gestured to Valentino. "This isn't the same man, Vox. The Valentino that embraced us is long gone."

Valentino frowned in confusion and Vox shook his head. "I don't believe that. He's still in there somewhere. He's just surrounded himself with armour." Vox flicked his gaze to Valentino once more and smiled gently. "What do you think, Val? Can we try this again? A second chance at being friends?"

Val scowled at Vox for a long moment before he straightened and headed into the dimly-lit room he had just left. He crooked his finger at Vox wordlessly, beckoning him closer.

Cautiously, Vox followed him inside, Alastor trailing behind, and Vox recognised the room as Valentino's bedroom.

His breath hitched at the wall of mirrors beside them, each one showing a different version of Vox.

Some showed him as a complicated machine, and others showed him as a dark, mysterious figure without a face. A few mirrors displayed images of a shark-like creature with too many teeth and too wide a grin, and some displayed Vox's reflection surrounded by bolts of lightning with bright sparks leaping chaotically from his frame.

Then there were the mirrors that reflected Vox as naked, with too many scars and bruises to count, some bearing choke marks and restraint bruises and suspicious fluids dripping between his thighs. There were some mirrors that reflected Vox with a broken head and a gaping hole in his chest where his heart should have been, tears dripping from the edge of his cracked screen and his body torn up as though he had been in some sort of fight.

And then, there were the mirrors depicting some sort of huge, vicious monster, with spikes over its frame and electricity sparking dangerously over every inch of its body, and wires snaking around its arms and neck like serpents. The monster was mouthless, its screen dark with only two red eyes etched crudely into its surface, and its skin was covered in red circuit traces, angry and threatening. Its claws were long and sharp and cables sprouted from its back like tentacles, and a great, shark-like tail thrashed behind it as it held a tiny beating heart in one hand and a luminescent blue chain in the other.

Vox studied the monster for a long moment before slowly turning to Valentino, nausea rolling in his stomach.

"Still think we can be *friends*?" Valentino asked lowly.

Vox licked his lips. "...Val, I never meant-"

"I don't want to hear it," Valentino growled. "Just give me your fucking soul so I can get out of here."

Vox gasped as the black chain around his neck shimmered into view and dragged him across the floor towards Valentino. He tried to dig his heels into the carpet, tried to fight against the unnatural force, but he fell in a heap at Valentino's feet and watched in horror as Valentino grasped the other end of the chain. Pink magic chased black and Vox tried to scramble away as Valentino smirked and yanked harshly at the chain.

"Val, please," Vox whimpered as he curled his fingers around his newly-pink collar.

Heat crept up his neck, burning his skin with humiliation as Valentino chuckled and tightened his grip on the chain, placing a heeled boot on Vox's stomach to keep him on the floor.

"We are going to have so much fun, amorcito," he purred, digging his heel just hard enough into Vox's skin to make him wince. "You've always been a performer, Voxy. This is just a different sort of performance. Imagine all the fans you'll gain when they see that transparent skin of yours. Imagine the *excitement* at your debut - '*Former CEO fucked by angry employees!*'" Val smiled darkly. "I could rent you out like Angel. Have you stand on street corners in nothing but a thong and fishnets. You'll be Hell's favourite *freak*. You'll have sinners lining up for *miles* to taste you, to ruin you, to *destroy* you every way they know how, all wanting the chance to have an Overlord submit to them."

Vox trembled, eyes wide and breaths shaky as he stared at Valentino in terror.

"You wouldn't do that to me," Vox whispered, uncertainty stirring in his gut. "I know you wouldn't. You're not that cruel."

Valentino smiled and it was an unpleasant thing that crawled slowly across his face and made him almost unrecognisable.

"Are you sure, Vox?"

Vox thought about how Valentino had so easily dismembered him and soldered a bomb onto his processor, how eagerly he had made a deal with Roo to get a hold of Vox's soul, and suddenly, Vox understood why Angel was so afraid of the moth-demon.

He swallowed, lost for words and overwhelmed with fear and humiliation, and Valentino chuckled and shifted his foot to Vox's crotch, pressing his heel painfully against Vox's dick.

"You're finally *mine*," Valentino grinned, looking quite deranged.

Alastor appeared beside them faster than Valentino had a chance to register, and he gripped the pink chain with both hands and *pulled*.

The weakened link prised open and *snapped* and the chain flickered and flashed before crumbling to dust.

"**No!**" Valentino screeched, trying to catch the disintegrating remains of the chain as Vox's hand flew to his throat and he inhaled a shuddering breath.

Alastor quickly dragged Vox away from Valentino, yanking him to his feet and standing in front of him with his teeth bared. Vox could *feel* Alastor's fury, could feel the outraged sting of his static and his grating frequency, and the way he was trying to summon magic that couldn't be summoned in a place made of shadows.

The constant pressure at Vox's throat - the one he had struggled against for *fifty years* - was *gone*.

Alastor had freed him.

He was *free*.

Tears dripped down his screen and he blinked rapidly, trying to stop himself from crying with relief as he laid a hand over his mouth.

He trembled, staring at Alastor in shock and gratitude and affection and a hundred other emotions he couldn't process. His knees wobbled and he dropped to the floor again with a strained noise of relief and *anguish*.

Alastor remained planted firmly in front of him, *protecting* him. Shielding him from Valentino's greedy gaze.

"You were supposed to be mine!" Valentino roared. "I *paid* for you! I got that *brat* here! I traded my own fucking soul for you!"

Vox looked up at him in alarm. "What?"

"I was supposed to walk out of here with your fucking contract!" Valentino snarled. "That was the deal! I *paid* for it! I don't understand - you're supposed to be miserable! You're supposed to lose all hope! You're supposed to be *despairing*!" He kicked the dusty remains of the chain. "How come Alastor can interfere with *our* deal?"

"You traded your soul to her?" Vox breathed in horror.

"I had nothing left to lose!" Valentino hissed. "And now I've lost the one thing I came here for!"

Alastor narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean we're supposed to be *despairing*?" he asked slowly.

Valentino shot him a vicious look. "Are you stupid? It's your fucking trial, isn't it? A test of *despair*. When I got here, Roo wrote it on my arm to tell me which trial I was a part of."

Vox's breath hitched as Alastor frowned.

"Oh, Val," whispered Vox pityingly.

Valentino scowled in confusion and Alastor revealed the word carved into his arm.
Humiliation.

Valentino stared at the word for a long moment before his face drained of colour and he rolled down his glove to reveal the word carved into his arm.

Despair.

He began to shake. "No," he whispered. "No, I never agreed to-" He swallowed, looking at Vox and Alastor desperately. "I'm not supposed to face the trials! I never agreed to starting-" He paused, eyes widening as he slapped a hand over his mouth. "Shit," he whispered as some sort of epiphany struck him.

He lifted his gaze to the ceiling. "You tricked me!" he cried frantically. "I wasn't agreeing to the trials! I was agreeing to our *deal*! You said you'd put me in Vox's trial! You said you'd give me his soul!"

There was a breathy chuckle but no other response.

"She did," said Alastor quietly. "She put you in Vox's trial and she gave you his soul - for about a minute. You mustn't have been very specific."

Valentino stared at Alastor in horror before a thick black chain appeared around his neck and dragged him onto his hands and knees. He pulled at it desperately, trying to pry the links open, but the chain remained intact.

“It appears as though you need another person to break your chain,” said Alastor. “You can’t break your own.”

Valentino stilled, looking up at Alastor hopefully.

Alastor narrowed his eyes and Valentino quickly shifted his gaze to Vox instead.

“Please,” he whimpered. “I’m sorry, Voxy. You were right - I didn’t mean any of what I said. I’m just scared and hurting and frustrated and-” He shook his head. “I *want* us to be friends again. It’s all I want. Please, amorcito. Please help me.”

Vox stood and remained behind Alastor as he scowled at the moth-demon.

Valentino’s hopeful smile began to fade and he closed his eyes and pressed his head against the carpet. He trembled and started to cry silently.

“I never wanted this,” he whimpered after a moment.

“To be trapped in Purgatory and chained to a monster?” Alastor asked coolly. “No, I don’t suppose you did. But you made your choices, Valentino, so now you must suffer the consequences.”

“I never wanted to become *this!*” Valentino snarled, lifting his fiery gaze to Alastor even as tears streamed down his cheeks. “I’ve lost *everything*.”

“You willingly gave your soul away out of greed and a lust for revenge,” Vox said harshly. “You didn’t *lose* it - you *threw it away*.”

Valentino squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m not talking about my soul!” he snapped. “I *know* I threw it away!” He glowered at the carpet for a few seconds. “I’ve lost who I was.”

Vox and Alastor fell silent, watching him in surprise as he remained crumpled over the carpet.

“I used to be *good*,” Valentino whispered. “Not good enough for Heaven, but better than *this*. I was miserable, but I wasn’t cruel. And then you came into my afterlife and the world got... brighter.”

He curled his fingers into the carpet. “We could have been good friends. I needed friends. Alastor hated me from the start but I understand *why*, because I was everything he was running from, everything that had *hurt* him, and instead of using what Roo told me to help him, I *attacked* him. And then I tried to separate you both and it *worked*. And instead of supporting each other, we fucking *broke* each other.”

Valentino slowly raised his gaze. “And it’s my fault. It’s all my fault. Because I was a coward and a monster and fucking *stupid*—” He cut himself off and clenched his jaw as Alastor and Vox stared at him with wide eyes.

“And I had so many opportunities to fix it,” Valentino whispered. “So many opportunities to tell you both and stop everything that was to come.”

He met Vox’s gaze. “You keep saying that you didn’t listen, that you treated me like shit and made me feel worthless and that’s why I am the way I am.” His antennae lowered. “But that isn’t true. I treated you just as poorly. I made you feel worthless. Inhuman. I was jealous of your love for Alastor and I got greedy and I should have helped you grieve but I didn’t and—” He shook his head, clicking his tongue angrily. “You shouldn’t have suffered all that. If I hadn’t been such a coward, you two wouldn’t have been *enemies* for fifty years.”

Vox’s gaze softened a fraction. “Val—”

“Let me finish,” Valentino said and he sounded tired, more weary than Vox had ever heard him. He looked up at Alastor and Vox once more.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for betraying you. For becoming the exact thing I once loathed. I’m sorry for all the vile shit I said and the horrific crap I’ve done to you both and I’m sorry for becoming this irredeemable fucking *monster* that would trade his own soul away to *possess* yours, because he has absolutely nothing left to lose.”

A sob tore out of Valentino’s throat suddenly as he clutched at his intact antenna. “I fucking *raped* Angel. Forced him into a contract and-” Another sob grated out of him.

Alastor’s eyebrows shot to his hairline and Vox sidestepped the Radio Demon and padded cautiously towards the broken moth-demon.

“And then I fucking raped you!” Valentino cried as he looked up at Vox.

Vox stilled and shook his head. “No, Val, that wasn’t... We were together. It wasn’t-”

“You said *red*, ” Valentino whimpered. “I heard you. You said *red*. You said it multiple times and I *ignored* you. I wanted to hurt you and I kept going, kept degrading you, kept humiliating you because I was so *angry* and-” His lower hands gripped his legs so tightly that his claws bit into his skin. He grimaced at the pain at first but then Vox watched his claws sink deeper into his flesh, *purposefully* drawing more blood.

“I’m *evil*, ” Valentino whispered, squeezing his eyes shut. “I’m fucking *evil* and disgusting and I’m no better than the humans that used me and left me to *burn*. Maybe I’m worse.”

Vox sank to his knees and laid a gentle hand on Valentino’s head, stroking his fluffy antenna the way he liked.

Valentino flinched away from his touch, but Vox merely returned to petting the antenna, hushing the moth-demon’s crying.

“I’m sorry,” Valentino sobbed after a few moments, body wracked with trembles. “I’m sorry, Vox. I’m so fucking sorry. I never deserved you. I deserve to die here. You should let me rot.

You found your happiness with Alastor and you need to keep hold of that. You two are so good for each other and I can *see* it, but I was greedy and I wanted you for myself, even if it made you miserable, and you're *right* - Alastor can give you so much more than I can, he can take care of you and he protects you so fiercely, and you deserve happiness, Vox. You both deserve happiness and I deserve to *die* in Purgatory and- *fuck*, I *dismembered* you and stored you in fucking *boxes* in my closet and I shot Vel and what the fuck is wrong with me? You're a fucking *person* not some damn machine and the old me wouldn't have *dreamed* of treating you like that! Shit! I'm fucking *foul* and psychopathic and- oh, just leave me here, Vox. I deserve everything that's coming to me."

Vox looked up as Alastor settled by Valentino's other side. He didn't touch the moth-demon, but he did frown at him in pity.

"Challenging, aren't they?" Alastor said quietly.

Valentino glanced up at him in confusion.

"These trials," Alastor clarified. "They're designed to make us reflect on ourselves, but if we're not careful, they can destroy us."

"I'm already broken," Valentino muttered.

"Yes," agreed Vox as he toyed with Valentino's antenna. "But that's okay. That's why you need friends - to help repair you."

"Careful now," Alastor drawled. "You're starting to sound like Charlie."

Valentino glanced between them in surprise before slowly sitting upright. "You... You *want* to help me? After everything I did? After trying to take control of your soul? After all the vile shit I threatened to do to you?"

Vox shrugged. "Forgiveness has to start somewhere."

“It starts with *sorry*, ” hummed Alastor in amusement. “That’s your foot in the door.”

Vox’s eyebrows pinched together in confusion before he shook his head. “Al’s right. You’ve apologised, so let’s move on and beat these trials. We can do it together.”

Alastor nodded. “The path to forgiveness is a twisting trail of hearts.” He looked very pleased with himself and Vox, for the afterlife of him, couldn’t understand *why*. He chose to ignore his lover’s strange amusement. He had long since accepted Alastor’s weirdness.

Valentino blinked at Alastor in confusion and Alastor smirked back.

“But I’m only on the first trial,” Valentino said quietly.

“We’ll wait for you. We’ll help you through them,” Vox said with a smile as he rubbed Valentino’s back and watched the moth-demon immediately lean into his touch. “We’re going to get out of here, Val. All of us.”

Alastor lurched forwards suddenly and Valentino jerked away with a gasp, gaze focused on Alastor’s outstretched, sharpened claws.

He gripped Valentino’s chain and yanked and the chain began to fade beneath his fingers as Roo frantically worked to hide it from view. Vox scrambled for the chain and with both his and Alastor’s efforts, the chain snapped before it could fully disappear.

Valentino sucked in a deep breath, hand racing to his neck as he glanced between Vox and Alastor in shock, and an icy wind whipped around them, biting at their skin furiously as the lights in the room flickered and flashed.

“Vox,” Alastor murmured as he pointed at the wall of mirrors, and Vox turned to see that his reflections had changed. Instead of the mysterious figures and broken, wounded sinners and

hideous monsters, the mirrors now depicted Vox in his earlier years with his boxy head and brilliant smile. There were images of a more recent Vox, with transparent skin and a brightly glowing heart and a soft gaze. There were still a few that displayed Vox with electricity sparking off his frame and a couple that showed him with a shark-like grin, but the majority of the reflections were *good*, with warm eyes and amused smiles.

Vox stared at an image of him holding two hearts in his palms and two broken black chains hanging off his arms - them having clearly fallen off the hearts.

He raised an eyebrow at Valentino and Valentino's cheeks darkened. "I've realised something," he muttered embarrassedly.

Alastor smirked, apparently already knowing what Valentino was about to confess. "And what's that?"

Valentino's cheeks darkened further. "It isn't a competition. There's room for both of us."

Alastor's smirk widened and Vox barked out a laugh and slung an arm around Valentino's shoulders. "*Finally!*"

Tentatively, Valentino returned the embrace, burying his head into Vox's shoulder in a combination of shame and relief.

Alastor made a noise of intrigue. "Congratulations, Valentino."

Valentino and Vox looked up and watched the room melt away as they were spat out into the corridor of the funhouse. Door sixteen disappeared, leaving a solid wall, as though it had never existed in the first place.

Valentino straightened as a bell tolled.

“One trial down, five to go,” Alastor drawled and Valentino’s antennae *vibrated* in a way that had Vox’s breath catching and his chest aching at old memories.

He held Valentino tighter. “Fuck, I’ve missed you,” Vox whispered.

Valentino squeaked in surprise before clutching desperately at Vox. “I’ve missed you too, cariño.”

“Hm... One door left,” Alastor mused and Vox glanced over Valentino’s shoulder to the door at the end of the corridor. He squinted at the name written in red neon above it.

Alastor.

Vox grinned and Alastor wiggled his eyebrows playfully. “Want to see what *I* really think of you?”

With a laugh, Vox pulled Valentino to his feet and made a face. “I won’t be impressed if any of those mirrors depict me as braised steak.”

Alastor hummed thoughtfully. “My dear, you’re much too high quality of a cut for *braising*. Smoking, perhaps...”

“I don’t think I want to go in there,” snorted Vox and Alastor smirked and sauntered towards the door, opening it and slipping inside the dark room with a sinister grin that glowed for a brief moment before fading to black.

“He’s so creepy,” Valentino whispered.

“He’s a clown,” Vox scoffed before dragging Valentino with him.

They stumbled into the dark room and Alastor flicked the lights on, revealing the hotel lobby, but covered wall to wall in *mirrors*.

“Damn,” said Valentino and Vox stepped further into the room, startling when his shoes *clinked* against the floor. He looked down to find a floor of mirrors.

“Alastor,” Vox breathed as he turned around the room slowly, taking in every reflection.

There were *hundreds* of different versions of him - with soft smiles and various television screens. There were versions with his clothes on and some with his clothes off - with his skin glowing and his organs visible and him looking vulnerable and shy. There were versions with a chain around his neck and versions of him looking battered and bruised and angry. There were versions with hearts in his eyes and others with his hypnotic spirals. There were versions of him with a cracked screen and snapped antennae and some with him crying openly, and then there were others with a red collar around his neck with Alastor’s name engraved onto a golden tag, and some with Vox holding Alastor’s heart protectively in his hands. There were rarer reflections with Vox soaked to the bone and a grin on his face - clearly after having fallen into the canal, and there were some with fairy lights glinting dimly off his screen, looking content and beautiful and Vox remembered those fairy lights from the nights they danced together.

Some reflections depicted him in his true form and others depicted him as a violent monster and Vox frowned at these reflections in confusion, trying not to let them sting.

Alastor crept behind him, placing his hands around his hips as he propped his chin on his shoulder.

“A couple of these show me as a monster,” Vox murmured.

“Yes,” agreed Alastor and Vox tried not to flinch. “I have, on occasion, seen you as a monster.”

“When I hurt you,” Vox mumbled.

“Yes,” said Alastor softly as he squeezed Vox’s hips reassuringly. “But as you can see, you are far more than that.”

Vox glanced up at the other mirrors, chest aching. “Al-”

“There is nothing wrong with you having flaws,” Alastor whispered. “That’s what I love about you, my dear. You have these flaws and you work so hard to fix them. You’re always the first to extend the olive branch. You’re so eager to help those you care about.” He glanced at Valentino and Vox relaxed against him a fraction.

“Those reflections where you’re a monster are just as precious and beautiful to me as those where you’re soft and happy, or those where you’re naked and vulnerable. I love that you’re complicated. I love that you try so hard to better yourself, and I love that you don’t hide any part of yourself from me, even when it scares you to show me.”

Vox’s breaths shook and he whirled around in Alastor’s grip and buried his face against his chest, suddenly overwhelmed by all of the reflections.

Alastor stroked his ports comfortingly. “When I say I love all of you, Vox, I mean *all* of you.”

Vox’s screen burned with humiliation and Alastor chuckled and kissed an antennae. “Too much?” he teased.

Vox fell to his knees and pressed his lips to Alastor’s stomach and Alastor quietened as Vox exhaled a shaky breath.

“I don’t deserve this sort of devotion,” he whispered, eyes squeezed shut.

“You do,” Valentino said softly as he looked around the mirrors in awe. “And I thought I could match up to Alastor, I thought I could love you *more* than him, treat you better...” He

caught Alastor's gaze. "But I see now how wrong I was. I could never compete with *this*."

Alastor hummed contentedly and stroked Vox's ports as he looked around the mirrored room. "It isn't a competition."

"No, but how could I have ever thought you would abuse him?" Valentino asked. "How could I have ever thought you'd leave him willingly when *this* is how you really see him?"

Alastor blinked slowly and gazed down at Vox. Vox stared up at him adoringly, gripping his hips tighter.

"I fucking love you," Vox breathed and Alastor smiled lazily and brushed his fingers along the edge of Vox's screen as a door with an *Exit* sign appeared on the far wall.

"Come on, my love," Alastor purred. "Let's get you out of this damn funhouse."

Vox made to stand but yelped when Alastor swept him off his feet and carried him towards the door bridal style. He laughed and tried to wriggle out of Alastor's grip and Alastor merely held him tighter as he marched towards the door. Valentino scuttled forwards, opening the door for them, and Alastor tipped his head politely before carrying Vox through the threshold.

A bell tolled and the funhouse faded away behind them.

Vox curled a hand around the back of Alastor's neck and pulsed affectionate static between their foreheads.

Suddenly, the floor opened up beneath them and they were *falling*.

Alastor awoke to laughter and hands pawing at his body.

His brows pinched together as he forced his eyes open and he gasped at the sight of *hundreds* of sinners surrounding him, taking pictures of him, pointing and laughing and smirking and *touching him*.

He clawed at the nearest sinner, tearing great slices through their throat, and he bared his teeth and growled like a feral dog, lunging for the next sinner, only to choke and cough as he slumped uselessly to the floor.

There was a chain around his neck. He looked down at himself and his face burned with shame and humiliation at the realisation that he was entirely *naked*.

He closed his legs and drew his knees to his chest, heart pounding and breaths shallow, and he looked back frantically, tugging at his chain only to realise it was tied to... his radio tower?

He pulled at the long silver chain, trying to break it, but the metal held fast and taut and Alastor barely had any slack to move.

Someone squeezed his tail. He turned and kicked a hoof in their face and there was another round of laughter and applause, like he was some sort of performer in a circus. His ears flattened as more people took pictures of him and he tried to scramble away, pressing himself against the wall of the hotel as he covered his crotch with his hands.

The sinners closed in on him, mocking him, ridiculing him, and he couldn't *breathe* as his face burned and his antlers grew, and he twisted into a more demonic form, swiping viciously at the sinners advancing on him. He killed two, but three more took their place, so he bit and kicked and clawed, but there were too many sinners and they swarmed him, dragging him down into the sea of laughing masses, and he struggled and writhed against them as they pawed and petted and tugged at him.

"Please," he begged as he shrank down to his normal size to curl in on himself. "Please stop. Go away. Let me go."

More laughing. More pictures. Their hands became more insistent, yanking his chain until he choked, digging fingers into bruises and wounds he hadn't even noticed were present. They touched him *everywhere*, forcing his thighs apart so they could take pictures, gripping his cock so they could snap selfies with it, wrapping their hands around his throat, pulling at the sutures he hadn't realised were showing at his mouth, yanking his tail, trying to *break* his antlers.

He attempted to summon his shadows but nothing happened, so he tried calling his silhouette before remembering that it didn't exist in Purgatory.

He kicked out frantically but they grabbed his hooves and worked their fingers between his digits, stimulating the scent glands there as his face burned darker and darker at his own helplessness.

“You like that, Radio Demon?”

“Too weak to fight back!”

“Helpless little fawn.”

“Look, he's enjoying it! Look how hard he's getting!”

He squeezed his eyes shut at their taunts as he trembled and he tried to cover his ass with his own tail. “Stop,” he begged.

“What sort of Overlord sells his own soul?”

“What sort of Overlord lets himself get raped?”

“Doesn’t he look *delicious*?”

“The Great Radio Demon is mere *prey*. ”

There was a tongue on his face and he gasped and jerked away, only for someone to pull him into their lap and *bite his shoulder*.

He yelped, sweat trickling down his neck and blood rushing between his ears. He struggled and thrashed but there were more hands on him, holding him down, restraining him, and then there were tongues and teeth and *pain* as he screamed.

“Alastor!”

His terrified gaze snapped up, scanning through the crowd to see Vox racing towards him, shoving sinners out of the way and slashing his claws through two sinners that were restraining Alastor.

Alastor choked out a sob as Vox dragged him out of the throng of teeth and claws and tongues, but then Vox’s eyes went wide and he grimaced.

The sinners crept closer, like cockroaches, and Alastor trembled and tried to press himself against Vox, to hide, but Vox held him at arm’s length.

“Alastor, there are *chunks* of you missing,” Vox whispered and Alastor looked down at himself slowly, horrified at the sight of entire pieces of flesh missing, muscles and bone exposed in places and there were so many bruises and so much *pain* and everyone was taking pictures and laughing and they looked *hungry* and-

He reached for Vox, trembling, but Vox pushed him away with a look of disdain.

“Why the fuck are you hard?” he hissed. “Are you... Are you getting *off* on this?”

Alastor looked down at himself and realised that he was, indeed, quite hard.

He shook his head frantically. “No! No, Vox.” Someone gripped his tail and he jerked forwards, seeking protection from Vox once more, but Vox shoved him into the sea of grinning sinners with a look of disgust.

“No wonder Harriet left you,” Vox growled. “You’re fucking vile. Filthy. Sick. How could I ever stay with someone so *pathetic*? You’re supposed to be an Overlord, Alastor, and look at what you’re letting them do to you!”

Alastor cried out as the teeth returned, tearing at his flesh, ripping through bone and nerves and exposed muscle, fingers pulling at his chain until he couldn’t breathe.

“Help,” Alastor begged through tears. “Help me.”

Valentino appeared beside Vox, a video camera in one hand, and he grinned in amusement before focusing the lens on Alastor, zooming in on him as Vox turned away and left him.

“Vox!” Alastor called desperately. “Vox, please! Don’t leave me here!”

“Bit of a running theme, sí?” Valentino taunted. “People leaving you for how *weak* you are. You’ll never escape this. You’ll never escape being seen as prey. That’s all you are, Alastor. It’s all you’ll ever be. Prey on a leash.” He smirked. “Now, smile for the camera, amorcito. All of Hell is watching.”

Alastor cried out with agony as someone bit into his neck. Claws tore at his stomach and blades buried themselves into his thighs and then there were people biting at his nipples and slicing their claws down his dick and- *oh, fuck, someone just cut his tail off-*

“Vox, help me!” he sobbed. He couldn’t beat this without Vox. He couldn’t fight them off. Vox wouldn’t leave him. Vox would *never* leave him. Vox wasn’t Harriet.

“Vox isn’t coming,” purred Valentino. “Vox abandoned you like you abandoned him. Why should he save you? You never saved him.”

Alastor stared at Valentino with ears pinned to his skull. He howled when someone tore a piece of his ear off.

“He’ll come for me,” Alastor managed through gritted teeth.

Valentino chuckled. “Look at you, Alastor. There’s barely anything of you left. Why would he want to stick around with someone who won’t fight back? Why would he stick around for a broken man on a chain? The herd won’t put themselves at risk for a doe that’s half-dead.”

Alastor snarled and kicked out at the sinners pushing their fingers into the scent glands at his hooves. “Vox will *never* abandon me,” he spat. “And I’ve come too fucking far to get *eaten*.” He twisted violently and ripped out the throat of the sinner that had torn his tail off. He was alarmed to see a bloody stump where one of his fingers used to be.

“You won’t *die*,” said Valentino solemnly. “You know we can’t do that. But we can piece you together. We can watch you get ripped apart over and over, mocked and ridiculed and taunted as they take pictures of you and touch you, and we’ll just keep putting you back together like a jigsaw puzzle, until you destroy yourself.”

Alastor froze and shifted his gaze slowly to Valentino. “...Who am I speaking to?”

“You’re speaking to us,” Valentino said with a scowl. “You need to stop. We can give you and your friends sanctuary. If you stop the trials, we can place the three of you in a peaceful world of your choosing.”

“And Charlie?” Alastor demanded.

“Out of our reach,” Valentino said firmly. “Do you accept our offer?”

“You know I can’t,” Alastor sneered.

“You’ll regret this,” Valentino growled. “The moth-demon will never beat these trials alone.”

“He won’t face them alone,” Alastor spat. “We’ll drag him through them if we have to.”

Valentino smiled like he knew a secret and unease settled in Alastor’s stomach.

“You should stop before you lose your friend.”

“We won’t lose him,” Alastor snapped. “We’ve learned our lesson. We won’t leave him this time. We won’t let him struggle alone.”

Valentino chuckled and dissolved.

Alastor frowned in confusion before he arched in agony as someone set a lighter against his *ass*.

He kicked their jaw, breaking it, and he allowed his antlers to grow as he swung his head back and impaled whoever was trying to choke him.

“I’m not your fucking *prey!*” Alastor roared as he fought back, but the moment he escaped his attackers, more leapt upon him, pushing him to his hands and knees, raking their claws through his back, biting his thighs, pulling his hair out, and- *oh, shit*, slicing a blade through his perineum.

He howled with agony and collapsed, trying to curl in on himself against the onslaught, but there were too many and he squeezed his eyes shut as they feasted upon him.

“Get the fuck off him!”

Alastor’s breath hitched and his eyes flew open at the smell of burning and he watched Vox - *his* Vox, the surrounding air thick with furious charge - wade through sinners in his true form, electrocuting anyone that got in his way and mauling those who didn’t clear a path fast enough. Valentino trotted after him with a gun he’d obviously stolen, shooting any stragglers that were stupid enough to try to creep up on Vox.

Vox plucked up two sinners that were pinning Alastor down and hurled them against the radio tower, breaking their necks. He poured electricity into another three until they *exploded*, and strangled the last two with the cables that slithered out of his back.

He picked Alastor up gently, dark screen mouthless but displaying two concerned red eyes. They widened at Alastor’s bloodied state before one formed a hypnotic spiral as he turned on the wary masses still edging towards Alastor.

Alastor exhaled in relief and nestled against Vox’s chest.

There was a heavy *thud* and a *whoosh* and a blaze of heat as the pressure at Alastor’s throat eased, and then there was a chorus of screams that had Alastor peeking one eye open to watch his fallen, *burning* radio tower set the closest sinners alight. Some had been crushed beneath the tower.

Valentino shot boredly at a demon that reached for Alastor’s hoof.

Vox shrunk down to a more reasonable size, holding Alastor tightly to his chest.

“You’re safe,” he whispered. “I’ve got you, sweetheart.”

Alastor nuzzled into his lover's neck, suddenly exhausted and he let Vox take his weight as his torn legs finally gave way. He shivered as Vox took his coat off and draped it around his shoulders and he cried silently against Vox's neck, suddenly overwhelmed.

Vox would *never* abandon him.

"You did so well," Vox praised. "You fought so hard. I'm so proud of you." He carded his fingers through Alastor's ruined hair. "Such a good buck."

Alastor curled into Vox weakly, humming when Vox rubbed his back.

"I don't understand," Valentino mused beside them. "How is getting eaten alive *humiliating*? Should this not be *Pain* or *Fear*?"

Alastor kept his face buried in Vox's chest. He was safe. Vox would keep him safe.

"Weakness," Vox murmured as squeezed Alastor reassuringly. "It's about weakness, Val. It's humiliating for him to be seen as *weak*. It's humiliating for him to be seen as *prey*. It's humiliating for all of Hell to know that he's on a chain. It's humiliating for all of Hell to know that he's been *raped*."

Valentino pulled a face. "But Hell doesn't think he's weak. He's the Radio Demon."

Alastor could still feel the heat from the burning radio tower. Why wasn't it dissolving? He had fought back against his attackers. He had beaten his humiliation... hadn't he?

"You told them what happened to him," Vox growled softly. "You revealed his secret. Released that stupid video of him being chased through the woods."

Alastor's heart raced, his eyes flying open. All of Hell knew his weakness. Valentino had *told* them.

"It was just an actor," Valentino protested. "An excuse for a shitty porno."

"It was more than that," Vox muttered. "You know it was. You wanted to humiliate him."

Valentino fell silent and Alastor scowled and twisted to look at him.

"You told everyone," he said. "You told them I was..." He trailed off, ears lowering in anger.

Valentino's antennae fell. "I didn't mean-" He cut himself off and looked away with a grimace. "...I did mean to. I was jealous. I caught you and Vox being gentle with each other after Vox and I had the argument about-" He cut himself off once more and flinched. "About what I did to him."

"About how you raped him," Alastor spat and Valentino winced.

Vox rubbed Alastor's back with a frown. "Hey, Al. It's fine-"

"It's not *fine*," Alastor growled, anger bubbling within him as he forced his weak legs to support his weight. "None of this is *fine*." He pushed away from Vox and glowered at Valentino as he gestured to their hungry audience. "This is all your fault. If you hadn't been so jealous and possessive and *spiteful*, Hell wouldn't know my secret! Vox wouldn't have faced Purgatory that first time, wouldn't have had to put up with all the *shit* you put him through! Vox and I wouldn't have been enemies for fifty years over a ridiculous misunderstanding - one that *you* created!"

Valentino blinked, antennae drooping even lower as he retreated a step. "I-"

“You’re what?” Alastor hissed. “You’re *sorry*? ‘Sorry’ doesn’t cut it. ‘Sorry’ doesn’t fix what you’ve done. ‘Sorry’ doesn’t change the fact that all of Hell knows how fucking weak I am!”

Vox reached for him. “Alastor, that’s not true.”

“Of course it is!” Alastor snapped as he rounded on Vox, ears flat and stomach rolling with nausea as he gestured to himself. “Look at me, Vox! I can’t stop them! I can’t fight so many. I couldn’t even fight one obnoxiously pompous angel!” He glanced down at his chest, noticing the deep gash that stretched down to his stomach - an echo of the injury Adam had inflicted upon him. Had that been there before? He couldn’t remember. He grimaced and averted his gaze. “I can’t fight. I can’t run. I can’t hide. I can’t... I can’t *stop* it. Any of it. They just keep catching me.”

“Al, no one is going to catch you,” Vox said gently. “You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

Alastor gritted his teeth and held his arms out. “*Look at me.* Look at what they’ve done. I’m a *mess*.”

Vox’s gaze softened and he carefully reached for Alastor, pulling him against his chest protectively and Alastor realised that there were tears rolling down his cheeks as his entire body trembled. He clutched at Vox, burying his face into his chest as his body was wracked with silent, shameful sobs.

“You’re safe,” Vox whispered into his hair. “I promise you’re safe.”

Valentino stared at them both with wide eyes and a slack jaw. “...What the *fuck* are you talking about?”

Both Alastor and Vox shot him a filthy look, which Valentino resolutely ignored.

“Of *course* you couldn’t beat Adam!” Valentino said incredulously. “He’s the leader of Heaven’s army of Exorcists! It took an archangel *and* the Princess of Hell to keep him down! He’s a dick, but he’s a powerful dick. The fact that you could hold your own for so long shows how incredibly strong *you* are, Alastor.”

Valentino scowled. “And what do you mean ‘they keep catching me’? Who’s ‘they’? The second anyone in Hell tries their luck, you fucking *eat* them, or torture them, or broadcast their screams across your radio show. And the ones you miss, Vox kills! So who exactly keeps ‘catching’ you? The creepy, soulless projections of sinners that Purgatory has made *specifically* to catch you? The ones that don’t have brains or any sense of self preservation and will just keep trying to grab you even though they are literally on fucking *fire*?”

He gestured behind Alastor and Alastor twisted to find a burning sinner reaching for him, half of their skin already melted off. A bullet lodged itself between their eyes and they slumped to the floor like a sack of bricks. Valentino lowered his smoking gun and glared at Alastor.

“You keep seeing yourself as prey, but all the predators are *terrified* of you! The smart ones hide from you and the stupid ones test their luck and suffer the consequences.” His shoulders slumped. “Like me. I thought I could humiliate you. I thought I could make you look weak to Vox and the rest of Hell, and look at what happened. You *killed* me, and I couldn’t even defend myself.” He looked away. “You’re not weak, Alastor. You’ve never been weak. You and Vox are the strongest Overlords, the strongest *people* I know.”

Vox and Alastor shared a surprised glance and Valentino watched them wearily.

“You’ve both overcome so much shit. So much heartache and suffering that you didn’t deserve. And after all of that, you’re *here*, competing in soul-crushing trials to save the Princess of Hell despite knowing how they could break you. If that isn’t a testament to your strength, then I don’t know what is.”

Alastor’s breathing calmed and he tilted his head a little at Valentino. It had been a long time since he had seen *this* moth-demon.

“For what it’s worth, I *am* sorry,” Valentino mumbled. “About the video. About a lot of things.” He shrunk in on himself. “I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough to defy her orders. I’m

sorry I wasn't smart enough to figure out she was bluffing all those decades ago."

Vox rubbed Alastor's back soothingly and Valentino managed a weak smile. "Looks like it all worked out though. Eventually. You two... You look good together. Happy." He huffed a laugh. "Intimidating."

Alastor glanced at Vox and realised that Valentino was right. They *had* overcome a lot together - betrayals and misunderstandings and heartache. Alastor had been terrified of letting anyone close, of letting anyone touch him, of letting anyone learn what had been done to him, and yet here Vox was. After fifty years of fighting, Vox had still chosen to *stay*.

The people in Hell now knew what had happened to Alastor in his human life and, aside from a few mocking words and a couple of stupid sinners who had tried their luck at touching him and had suffered the consequences, everyone was still wary of him. They still walked on the other side of the street when they saw him and they didn't dare cross him.

And now everyone knew that he and Vox were involved, sinners were doubly afraid of irritating either of them, knowing that to cross one of them would mean crossing both of them.

So, why was he so worried about how Hell saw him now they knew his secret? Nothing had changed. In fact, sinners were *more* wary of him because of his association with Vox.

The heat faded and Alastor turned to watch every sinner dissolve as his radio tower melted away. Vox made a noise of encouragement and Valentino managed a small smile.

Alastor nodded to him in acknowledgement as a bell tolled and a set of gates appeared. There were now four green lights on each stone pillar.

Alastor glanced down at himself to notice that he was fully healed and he hummed in approval before gesturing to the gate, noting that Vox and Valentino were also fully healed. "Shall we?"

Valentino trailed behind them cautiously and Alastor cast his gaze over his shoulder at the moth-demon. “Thank you,” he said and Valentino’s antennae pricked up eagerly.

“Thank you for breaking my chain,” he said quietly. “For helping me when I don’t deserve it.”

“We’re getting out of here together,” said Vox firmly. “And then the three of us are going to sit down and *talk*. Properly. About... everything. About the future and the present and the past, and we’re going to *fix* things. I’m *tired* of fighting.”

“Agreed,” drawled Alastor as he took Vox’s arm. “These past decades have been rather exhausting.”

A smile swept slowly across Valentino’s features. “...Really? You really want to do that after everything I’ve put you through?”

“That we’ve put each other through,” Vox corrected as he twisted to look at Valentino. “None of us are blameless here. But we’ll fix it. I promise we’ll fix all of it. I miss you, Val. And I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you.”

Valentino’s antennae vibrated happily and he let out a soft squeak of excitement as he trotted after them, fluffing his fur a little in his eagerness.

The gates opened and Vox and Alastor stepped through them, arm in arm.

As Valentino followed after them, the gates quickly closed, forcing Valentino backwards.

Alastor and Vox turned to him in surprise and he gripped the gates and attempted to force them open, but they remained firmly locked.

Valentino stared through the bars at them, eyes wide.

Alastor's stomach dropped as Vox's panicked static prickled his skin. The Television Demon rattled the gates desperately but they remained closed.

"No," Vox muttered as Valentino's fingers curled around the bars more securely. "He passed the trial, this isn't fair!" He kicked at the gate and still it didn't budge.

Valentino's antennae lowered. "Vox," he whispered and he sounded *afraid*.

Vox gritted his teeth and kicked harder at the gate. "Open, damn it!"

Another gate appeared a little distance away, this one with one green light on only one of its posts.

The three of them stared at it for a long moment and Valentino pushed away from the first gate and headed towards the second.

The moth-demon will never beat these trials alone.

Suddenly, the warning took on an entirely new meaning.

"Stop!" Alastor shouted and Valentino froze and turned to him. "Don't pass through that gate!"

Vox glanced at him in confusion. "He can't get through this one. He has to go through one."

"And if he steps through that gate, he'll face the rest of the trials *alone*," Alastor said, jaw clenched. "I was warned about this during my trial but I didn't think-" He shook his head angrily and tapped the closed gates. "Try scaling this one. There has to be a way through."

Vox frowned. “He’ll just pop out the other side and rejoin us. He’s got a second gate because he hasn’t completed as many trials as us.”

“No, he won’t,” growled Alastor. “If he passes through that other gate, we will *lose* him, Vox. I was *warned*.”

“By who?” Valentino asked curiously as he retreated to their gate once more.

“Purgatory,” Alastor muttered and Vox’s eyes widened for a moment before he snapped his gaze to the other gate warily.

Valentino raised an eyebrow and spread his wings. He tried to clear the top of the gate but suddenly, the iron bars stretched higher and higher and no matter how far Valentino flew, the gate reached up to meet him.

Valentino landed with a pale face.

Vox swallowed and rounded the gate, testing it from Valentino’s side.

“Fine,” Vox said defiantly. “Val doesn’t have to compete in his own trials. We’ve passed through the gate - we’ll drag him through ours. If Purgatory wants us to complete the trials separately, then that’s exactly what we’ll do.” He grabbed Valentino’s wrist and pulled him around the gate.

They waited.

And waited.

No words appeared on Vox and Alastor's wrists and eventually, the first gate disappeared, leaving only the second.

There was a breathy chuckle. "Trying to bend the rules?"

Alastor's ears flattened as Vox narrowed his eyes. Valentino swallowed.

"Purgatory won't let you change the game once you've started playing it. You can't take him with you."

"We're not changing the game," Vox growled. "We'll finish our trials and if we need to, we'll go back to help Val finish his."

Another chuckle. "That's called 'cheating'. You can't cheat Purgatory. Trust me, I should know."

"You cheat at everything," Valentino hissed.

A hum of amusement. "Look at you three, working together for the first time. Imagine how much *better* your afterlives would be if only you had worked together from the start..."

"And whose fault is that?" Vox snarled as he gripped both Alastor and Valentino's arms. "If you hadn't manipulated Val and trapped Alastor into a shitty contract-"

"Alastor agreed to that contract. And it isn't my fault that Valentino is stupid."

Valentino flinched and anger bubbled unexpectedly inside Alastor. "Your magic is woven into Purgatory. You could bend the rules for us. You could allow Valentino to compete with us."

“Could I?” Roo drawled in amusement.

“Don’t tell me you aren’t strong enough?” Alastor goaded. “You can lure souls here, control whether they leave or not, but you can’t bend one little rule about how the game is played? Losing your touch, perhaps?”

Roo made a noise of irritation. “Oh, I *can* change the rules - at least a little. I could allow Valentino to compete with you - reroute his gate so that he would also pass through yours... But I’m not going to.”

Alastor clenched his fists. “I thought you wanted us to set you free?”

She laughed. “Sweet fawn, you and Vox will pass these trials with or without Valentino.”

“How can you be so certain of that?” Vox demanded.

“Maybe I’m helping you,” she teased. “Making the trials easier.”

“Bullshit!” Vox snapped.

She hummed thoughtfully. “Maybe. Maybe not.” She laughed again. “Either way, I’m hungry and watching Valentino suffer through these trials alone will be a delicious snack.”

Vox slid his hand into Valentino’s as the moth-demon began to tremble.

“You’re a fucking bitch,” Vox growled. “If you don’t let Val stay with us, we won’t continue.”

“Interesting,” Roo purred. “I’ll tell you what, let’s make a little deal, just you and I, Vox. Choose.”

“Choose what?” Vox grumbled.

“Between Alastor and Valentino! One of them will face the trials alone and the other will stay with you,” Roo said excitedly. “Now, we both know Valentino will *die* if he faces them by himself, but Alastor... Well, he’s a tough old deer, isn’t he? He *might* have a chance.”

Sparks danced over Vox’s frame. “Fuck you.”

“Now, now, little picturebox! No need for such colourful language. What will it be? Who will you take with you?”

“Both,” Vox growled. “I’m not playing this game anymore. I’ve been playing your game for far too long; choosing between them, driving us apart because of it. I’m done. I want both of them and I’ll damn well have both of them.”

“Greedy television,” tutted Roo. “If that’s the case, then I’m afraid I can’t change the rules. Valentino will have to pass through his own gate and face his own trials. *Alone.*”

“I think you’re lying,” Alastor said, thinking quickly. “I don’t think you have enough power to change the rules. I think you’re weak and you’re toying with us.”

“I *can* change the rules.”

“Then why are you still trapped here?” Alastor scoffed. “No, clearly you’re not as powerful as you claim to be.” He smirked. “You couldn’t even hold onto Vox and Valentino’s chains.”

“You *broke* them,” she growled and the air grew colder.

“You got clumsy,” Alastor taunted. “Careless. Or... maybe you’re just that *weak*.”

“Beg,” she growled. “Get on your knees, you arrogant fawn, and beg for Valentino. Humble yourself to your master and plead for his life. Beg for the life of the man that dismembered and *raped* your lover. Beg for the life of the man that revealed your secrets to Hell out of envy and hatred. Beg for the life of the man that *destroyed* yours and *maybe* I’ll let him join you.”

Alastor’s smile grew thin-lipped before he slowly dropped to his knees and lowered his head.

“Alastor,” Valentino gasped softly.

“Please,” Alastor said, ignoring him. “Please let him join us, *master*.” He could do this for Vox. He could see that there was still a small space in Vox’s heart reserved for Valentino. There was a small part of Vox that loved Valentino even after everything they had been through and Alastor would do *anything* to make Vox happy. It was messy and complicated and it would be difficult to navigate once they left Purgatory because they would try again and they wouldn’t betray each other this time, and Alastor *knew* that Vox’s affection for Valentino would grow just as fast as Valentino’s affection for Vox would.

But it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter because although it would be complicated and difficult and it would *hurt* to watch Vox and Valentino fall in love, it didn’t mean that Vox would fall *out* of love with Alastor. Alastor could learn to share. Maybe. If it made Vox happy, he could learn anything.

They would figure it out.

“Please let him stay with us during the trials,” Alastor continued, head bowed and gaze lowered. “Don’t let him face them alone.”

He felt Vox kneel beside him. “Please,” added Vox as he took up a similar position to Alastor. “Let him compete beside us. Let us help him.”

“Shit,” Valentino whispered hoarsely as he stared at them both.

“I didn’t think you’d beg for him, sweet fawn,” she teased. “But my answer is still *no*.”

“Why?” Alastor snarled, springing to his feet. “If you’re so sure Vox and I will pass with or without him, then let him join us. There is no point in him *dying* here.”

“Of course there is,” she said lightly. “His misery will provide a sweet snack before I take your world.”

Alastor fell quiet, scrambling for a response.

“You’d let him suffer needlessly for a light snack?” Vox asked in horror. “After *everything* you’ve put him through?”

“Yes.”

“You’re a monster,” Vox whispered as Valentino trembled violently. Vox pulled him into his side. “You can’t do this! You *have* to help him! You owe him that much!” He petted Valentino’s damaged antenna as the moth-demon buried his face against Vox’s neck.

“I owe him *nothing*,” Roo said darkly. “He made his choices just as you made yours. He must suffer the consequences.”

“...You can’t alter the rules, can you?” Alastor asked quietly.

A pause. “No.”

Valentino collapsed to his knees and Vox fell with him, holding him tightly as the moth-demon sobbed into his shoulder.

“There must be something you can do,” Alastor begged in earnest.

No response.

“Please,” whispered Alastor.

He was met with silence. She had gone.

He turned to Vox and Valentino, watching his lover rock the moth-demon slowly back and forth as he rubbed his back and placed a protective hand over his head. “We’ll find a way,” Vox muttered. “I promise, we’ll find a way, Val.”

“I’m going to die here,” Valentino whimpered as he clutched at Vox. “I won’t hold out for long.”

“Two trials,” Vox murmured. “Two trials and I *swear* we’ll come and find you. We’ll come and save you, Val. You’ve just got to hold out.”

“I can’t,” Valentino cried. “I can’t wait that long. I know I can’t. I’m not as strong as you.”

“It isn’t that long,” Vox soothed, petting his fur ruff as Alastor sank beside them.

“Do you know how long you’ve been gone for?” Valentino whispered. “When I met you in the mirror trial, do you know how long you’d been gone?”

Vox frowned and shook his head.

“A year,” Valentino whimpered. “You’ve been missing for a year.”

Alastor and Vox stilled. “What?” Vox breathed. “No, that can’t- We’ve been here maybe a few days at the *most*. ”

Valentino shook his head and held Vox tighter. “The princess disappeared a year ago. Lucifer and the rest of the hotel have been fighting to get her back ever since. They assume you’re dead - the only reason I knew you weren’t was because Roo kept me updated.”

The flashes of golden light, thought Alastor. Was that Lucifer? Or maybe Heaven? Shouldn’t Heaven have been able to rescue Charlie and keep Roo trapped by now? Had Charlie already been saved?

Alastor glanced at Vox, stunned, and Vox stared at him in horror before tugging Valentino closer. “You can hold on, Val. I know you can. We *will* come back for you. I promise.”

“Maybe you don’t have to pass through the gates. Maybe you could wait here, between trials?” Alastor suggested.

Valentino glanced over at him curiously but they all startled as the bell tolled impatiently.

Valentino flinched and snuggled deeper into Vox. “I don’t think Purgatory will let me do that.”

“Don’t give up,” Vox growled. “We’ll come back for you. Remember that. We won’t let you die here, Val. We *will* get our shot at freedom, at *happiness*. The three of us. I promise. Just... hang on.”

Valentino cried silently into Vox’s neck and Alastor licked his lips, chest aching as he carefully reached out and rubbed Valentino’s back.

Valentino stiffened then glanced over at him before sitting straight and pulling both Vox and Alastor against him.

“I’m sorry,” he whimpered as he clutched at them. “I’m so fucking sorry. For everything.”

“We’ll fix it,” Vox whispered, sounding a little frantic. “Val, we can fix it. We can fix all of it. You’ve just got to wait for us.”

Valentino glanced at Alastor and Alastor saw the fear in his gaze and the silent acceptance that this would be the last time he saw either of them. Alastor found himself inhaling sharply, fingers curling into the moth-demon’s coat-like wings.

Finally, Valentino managed a smile and it was with a start that Alastor realised that the moth-demon was putting on a brave face for Vox.

“Maybe in another life, we could have been friends,” Valentino said gently to Alastor. “I think I would’ve liked that.”

Alastor found himself at a loss for words as he nodded tightly. “I... would have liked that too,” he finally said.

“You can still be friends,” Vox said desperately as he fisted Valentino’s vest. “Val, once we get out of here, we’ll sit and talk and iron everything out, and we can all be friends and we’ll be happy and- and-”

Valentino caught the bottom of Vox’s screen with a soft, adoring smile and Vox fell silent.

“After everything, I still find myself in love with you, amorcito,” Valentino whispered and as Vox’s eyes welled with tears, Valentino pressed a sweet kiss to the top of Vox’s screen. “But I’m happy that you found someone who loves you better than I ever did.”

Vox trembled and shook his head. “Val, no. No, don’t do this. Please. Please don’t say goodbye. It isn’t goodbye. We... We’re going to see each other again, right, Alastor? Tell him. Tell him we’ll see each other again. Tell him we’ll come back to save him.”

Alastor felt choked, eyes going wide as his heart cracked at Vox’s desperate begging. “I-” He looked up at Valentino and the moth-demon smiled sadly at him and suddenly, Alastor couldn’t *breathe*.

It was all so final.

After so many decades of competing with Valentino, of *hating* the moth, of fighting him and being jealous of him and *this* was how it ended? Tricked once again by Roo and her *deals*.

Alastor had won, but it didn’t feel like much of a victory, especially when Vox was sobbing into the moth-demon’s chest, begging him to stay.

“We’ll come back for you,” Alastor murmured as he gazed at Valentino, and he *meant* it. He truly meant it. “This isn’t the end. We won’t let you perish here.”

Valentino’s smile faltered for a fraction of a second before he held Vox and Alastor tightly to him.

“I’m so proud of you both,” he whispered as he clung to them and Alastor felt a tear slide down his own cheek. He hooked his chin over Valentino’s shoulder as Vox wailed against his chest.

“Keep fighting,” Alastor said for the moth-demon’s ears only, breath ghosting across Valentino’s cheek. “We *will* save you.”

Valentino splayed a protective hand over Alastor's back and he nuzzled gently at Alastor's ear.

"I don't deserve to be saved," he whispered low enough that Vox wouldn't be able to hear.

Alastor froze and Valentino pulled away from them both with a warm smile and squeezed their shoulders before he stood.

Vox scrambled to his feet. "Val-"

"Good luck," Valentino interrupted and his gaze shone with unshed tears. "Be happy together, for me."

He turned and flew towards the gates and Vox sprinted after him, hand outstretched and screen glitching in distress. Alastor couldn't will his legs to stand and he watched, heartbroken, as Valentino stepped through the gates and vanished.

The gates closed before Vox could reach them.

"No!" Vox cried, rattling the bars. "No, Valentino! Come back! We- We'll save you! I promise we'll fucking save you!"

He slumped to his knees, still holding the bars and he choked out a heart-wrenching sob when the gates disappeared. He wrapped his arms around himself and cried.

Pain blossomed over Alastor's wrist and he glanced down to find the word '*Fear*' carved into his flesh.

Finally, Alastor found the strength to move. He staggered over to Vox and wrapped himself around his back and simply held his lover as he wailed.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Gore

Do you think Val deserved a second chance? Let me know in the comments - I love reading your opinions on him ;)

Chapter 60: Fear - Pt. I

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom (TAKE HEED)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

It could have been minutes or hours as Alastor continued to hold his lover through his sobs, and he peppered comforting kisses over his neck and shoulders and the back of his screen as he rocked Vox back and forth gently. He blanketed Vox in soothing static, nestled a reassuring frequency against Vox's erratic one, and eventually, Vox whirled around in his arms and clutched desperately at him, fisting his hair and stifling his cries when Alastor kissed every inch of his screen, slowly, *sadly*.

"I love you," Vox whimpered as he tucked himself against Alastor's body. "You know I love you, don't you? I love you so fucking much."

"I know," Alastor soothed and he rubbed Vox's back and brushed his fingers gently over the ports at the back of his head.

"We'll come back for him, won't we?" Vox whispered as he pressed his face into Alastor's chest.

"Yes," Alastor said gently. "Of course we will."

"He's going to be okay, isn't he?"

Alastor hesitated, remembering Valentino's parting words. *I don't deserve to be saved.*

"I don't know," Alastor admitted and Vox clung tighter to him.

“...We’re going to be okay, aren’t we?” Vox asked quietly.

Alastor curled around Vox protectively. “Yes,” he said fiercely. “Yes, we’re going to get through this.”

Vox’s fingers curled into his back. “I can’t lose you too,” he whimpered.

“You won’t lose me,” Alastor growled. “I’ll always fight for you. For us. I’ll never give up on *this*.”

Vox shuddered and crawled into Alastor’s lap and Alastor wrapped his arms possessively around him. He curled a hand around the back of Vox’s neck when his lover captured his lips and kissed him desperately.

“I’m sorry,” Vox breathed against his lips as he trembled. “I’m sorry for all the terrible shit I did to you. I’m sorry for hurting you and not believing you and attacking you and-”

“Hush,” Alastor whispered as he traced a finger around Vox’s ports. “Enough of that. You know I’ve already forgiven you.” He kissed the top of Vox’s screen as his lover whined softly. “I need you to be strong for me, Picturebox. I need you to pick yourself up and *believe* that I’ve forgiven you, that I love you, and that we’re going to walk out of here together. Can you do that for me?”

Vox nodded slowly and Alastor captured his lips in a firm kiss, which Vox immediately melted into.

“We’re almost there,” Alastor murmured against Vox’s lips.

Vox nodded and pulled back, then frowned at something behind Alastor. Alastor twisted and his breath caught in his throat. “Oh my.”

Vox squeezed his hip in query.

“That... That’s my parents’ house,” Alastor said and he stood, pulling Vox with him.

Vox checked his wrist with a frown. *Fear.*

Alastor grabbed his lover’s hand, suddenly nervous. What would he find in there?

Vox tugged him into his side. “I’ve got you,” he murmured and Alastor relaxed a fraction before taking a breath and pushing onward.

The door was unlocked and Alastor stepped into the house with Vox by his side. He froze at the sight of his mother, reading in her armchair as delicious smells of fruity baked goods wafted in from the kitchen.

“Mom?” he choked out.

She looked up at him with a warm smile. “Oh, Alastor! You’re here! And you brought Victor with you, how lovely!”

Alastor’s gaze darted to Vox and he blinked at the human face staring back at him. He glanced down quickly at himself and noticed that he, too, was human.

His mother stood, placing her book on the coffee table. “Your father has gone to the bar to meet with an old friend, or a colleague, or- oh, I don’t remember what he said. I told him you were coming and he promised he would be home late afternoon.” She opened her arms in invitation and Alastor staggered into them, fighting back tears when she embraced him.

“You’re staying for a few days, aren’t you?” his mother whispered. “Both of you? I’ve missed you both terribly.”

He clutched at her and nodded, unable to choke out any words as his fingers curled into her blouse. She was just as he remembered her, right down to her spiced perfume and the soft huskiness of her voice.

He squeezed his eyes shut to stop his tears from falling onto her shoulder.

“Oh, come here, Victor! Don’t be shy! You’re part of the family too,” laughed his mother as she flapped an arm uselessly at Vox.

Vox padded over slowly before winding his arms around both of them. He rubbed Alastor’s back reassuringly and a quiet sob tumbled out of Alastor.

“Are you alright, dear?” asked his mother worriedly as she tried to lean back to look at him, but he held her tighter and nodded.

“I’ve just missed you,” he managed hoarsely and he felt Vox’s arm snake around his waist.

“You’re a soft-hearted thing,” laughed his mother and Alastor found himself smiling weakly into her shoulder. “I suppose you learned that from your father.”

She wriggled out of his grip, chuckling when he held onto her tighter for a moment before releasing her. She straightened out her blouse. “How are you boys doing, anyway? Had any more trouble with the neighbours?”

Alastor licked his lips, struggling to find any words, and he glanced at Vox helplessly.

Vox smiled and draped his arm loosely around Alastor’s waist. “No, ma’am. Seems like they’ve quietened down for once.”

“Good,” huffed Alastor’s mother. “They’re just a couple of bigots who wouldn’t understand *love* if it turned up at their door with roses. Honestly. They need to learn to mind their own business and focus on their own marriage.” She gave Vox a sly look. “Number two told me that they didn’t speak once to each other during the street party.”

Vox grinned. “Really? How interesting.”

“That’s what I said!”

Alastor leaned into Vox and something in his heart warmed at the sight of the two of them interacting so comfortably - and his mother approving of his relationship with Vox was unexpected, but appreciated. It sounded as though his father approved too, which was... Well, there was a reason Alastor missed his parents so dearly. They had always wanted what was best for him. Supported him in every way that mattered.

“-and I’d almost feel sorry for her if she wasn’t such a massive bitch.”

Alastor blinked. “Mother!”

She giggled and waved him off. “I’m sorry, Allie, you know how I get about those horrible neighbours of yours. Especially when Vic gets me going!” She smacked Vox’s arm lightly as he laughed.

“Hey, don’t blame me! You’re the gossip,” Vox teased and she clicked her tongue at him but smirked and winked, and Alastor swallowed at how... *easy* it all was. How well Vox and his mother got along and how supportive she was of their relationship and how Vox just... fitted into his human life so perfectly.

Alastor was hit with a sense of longing. If only they had known each other back then. If only they had been born in the same era. They could have had this. Vox could have had a loving family and Alastor would have lived a long life with the man he loved.

Vox's thumb rubbed circles into his hip. "So," Vox chirped. "What's cooking, good looking?"

Alastor's mother giggled again and waved a hand at him. "You're such a charmer!" She flicked her gaze to Alastor. "You'd better keep your man on a leash, Allie, because someone is going to snap him right up if you let him stray. And at the rate he's going, I'll be snatching him from you when your back is turned! Don't worry, I'll leave a note for your father on how to use the oven."

She winked and Vox snorted in amusement and Alastor's chest flooded with affection and *grief*.

"Blackberry and apple crumble," his mother replied, crooking a finger at Vox to follow her. "And yes, I've saved the spoon for you to lick."

Vox grinned cheekily as she disappeared into the kitchen, then he wrapped his arm more securely around Alastor and watched him with a gentle smile. "You doing okay?"

Alastor managed a nod, brushing a dark strand of hair from Vox's face. Damn, he was beautiful.

Vox caught his knuckles and kissed them tenderly. "Sure?"

Alastor nodded. "I like watching you both," he whispered.

Vox rubbed his back and led him into the kitchen and he laughed when he was presented with a fruit-covered spoon. He took it and sucked it clean, and moaned in approval.

"Hm... No wonder my son likes you," Alastor's mother said coyly and Alastor spluttered in surprise.

“Mother!”

She laughed again. “Tell me I’m wrong!” she teased before taking the spoon off a snickering Vox and throwing it into the sink. “I’m so glad you’re free of that horrible woman. I know she dumped you, but I really do think it was the best thing that could have happened to you. There’s more chemistry between you and Victor than there ever was between you and Harriet.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Plus, I get some nice eye candy when he visits.”

“Your mom is *great*,” Vox laughed and she beamed at him.

“Well, what do you expect? My son is courting a handsome television star - I’m allowed to take advantage of the perks! And it’s got the neighbours talking. They think I’m having an affair with a young celebrity and it’s *fantastic* for my image around here,” she said with a sly grin. “So, if saving dirty spoons for you to lick will keep you coming back, then it’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.”

“Alastor never gives me any spoons to lick so I suppose I’ll have to keep visiting,” Vox drawled.

“Good boy,” she said firmly before putting her hands on her hips. “How about you two settle in upstairs and I’ll shout you when dinner’s ready? We’re having jambalaya.”

Alastor’s heart ached.

“Yes, ma’am,” Vox said, saluting her with two fingers before rubbing Alastor’s side. “You heard the lady.”

Alastor threw him a glassy look and Vox’s gaze softened.

“Alastor, dear, are you sure you’re alright?” his mother asked worriedly.

“Yes,” he managed as he curled his fingers into Vox’s sweater. “I just... I... I’ve missed... I want...” He trailed off, choked, and Vox cupped his cheek gently.

“Rough week,” Vox said, glancing at Alastor’s mother. “He’ll be alright now he’s home.”

Home.

A sob escaped Alastor and he gripped the hand Vox was cupping his cheek with.

“I want this,” Alastor whispered as he gazed desperately at Vox.

Vox carded his fingers through Alastor’s hair, frowning gently.

“Allie, is there anything I can do?” asked his mother.

Alastor’s heart clenched as he looked at her. He started to tremble, knees threatening to buckle. “I miss you so damn much.”

“I’m right here, dear,” she said as she approached him.

“You’re not,” he whimpered as tears rolled down his cheeks. “You’re not real.”

“Of course I’m real,” she said, alarmed as she pulled him against her. She petted his hair and looked up at Vox. “Vic, what’s happened?”

“A lot,” Vox said, swallowing thickly. “He just needs you to hold him for a while.”

Alastor cried into her shoulder and she held him tighter.

“I can do that.”

Alastor shivered and nuzzled into her blouse before squeezing his eyes shut. “Vox,” he whined.

Immediately, Vox pressed behind him, holding both him and his mother protectively, and Alastor allowed himself to cry. He allowed his grief and anguish to flow as he clutched at his mother, and she held him and stroked his hair and whispered soft words of her love for him as he broke down.

A soft humming quietened his sobs and he listened carefully to his mother’s voice, heart breaking at the familiar melody she used to hum when she was cooking. When she was *happy*.

“You know I’ll always love you, don’t you?” she whispered. “No matter what happens, your father and I will always love you. Both of you.”

Vox clutched them both tighter and Alastor swallowed and nodded. “I love you too,” he breathed.

She kissed his head and ruffled his hair and tilted his chin up to force him to look at her. “You’re always welcome to come home. Both of you. If anything ever goes wrong, you’ll always have a place here. You know that, don’t you?”

Alastor nodded and she thumbed the tears off his cheeks.

She glanced up at Vox and tutted. “Don’t you start.” She lifted a hand and Alastor looked at Vox in surprise as she wiped a stray tear from his cheek.

Vox smiled sheepishly at Alastor. "I'm uh... not used to having a family that wants me around."

His mother made a noise of distaste as she swept her fingers through Vox's hair. "Well, we love you dearly, Vic. And you'll always have a home here."

"Fuck," murmured Vox brokenly before his eyes widened and he opened his mouth, likely to apologise for his language.

"It's alright," Alastor's mother soothed as she rubbed both their cheeks. "You're safe here. You'll always be safe here."

Alastor relaxed against her, smile widening when Vox pressed deeper into his back.

"You know," she said after a moment, "you could... stay."

"We are staying over," Alastor reminded.

"I mean... forever. Here. With your father and I. You could be happy here. We could keep you safe from her."

Alastor stilled then jerked backwards, dragging Vox with him. He scowled at her and she frowned back.

"You could have another shot at your human life. Do it right this time. You could be happy with Vox and your parents," she said. "An eternity of love and contentment. Doesn't that sound better than completing these trials?"

"Come on, Vox. Let's go upstairs," Alastor growled as he grabbed Vox's hand.

“We’re giving you an opportunity to save yourselves. These last trials will *break* you.”

“You took Val from us,” Vox hissed. “We’re not giving up on him and we’re not giving up on Charlie.”

“Valentino wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for *her*,” Alastor’s mother said angrily. “We didn’t want to put him through the trials but she found a loophole to have him enter through yours. She is to blame, not us. Once the trials have started, we cannot stop them. It is part of our programming.”

“Your programming?” Vox echoed. “What are you? A machine?”

“No. We are a defence system created to keep The Root Of All Evil detained. These trials are her prison. She cannot break through them herself and if she tries to, it will result in her feeding from her own pain and misery and fear and fury, and she will grow weak. Perhaps weak enough to perish, but this hasn’t been tested.”

“A paradox,” muttered Vox. “Something that feeds off pain can’t itself compete in trials that test its pain. It’s like a snake eating itself.”

“Mortal souls were never meant to compete in the trials because they can *beat* them,” Alastor realised. “Which lets her escape without consequence.”

“She will kill you,” said Alastor’s mother desperately. “If you complete the trials, if you break through the walls of her prison, she will feed from you and leave you here and you’ll be trapped in an endless void of darkness. And all the souls we saved, all those who are living their lives in their safe illusions, they will be thrown into the darkness with you because we will *cease to exist* once the trials are completed. *Please*, we beg you. *Please stop*.”

“Save Charlie,” Alastor demanded. “Offer Valentino a chance at happiness here.”

“We *can't*,” Alastor’s mother snapped, pulling her hair in frustration. “Charlotte is unreachable to us and Valentino is refusing all offers of safety because *you* told him to wait for you. He trusts you’ll return for him but that *can't* happen because once you complete the trials, all of you will be trapped in this void of nothingness, with no way home.”

Alastor and Vox glanced at each other warily. “We can’t leave Charlie trapped with her,” Alastor said.

“She is almost gone anyway!” Alastor’s mother snarled. “She never started the trials - The Root didn’t offer her the option. Instead, Charlotte is being directly tortured and fed from and she is *weak*. Very weak. The Root is barely keeping her alive and all attempts to rescue her have *failed*. She is going to die before you can reach her, so why waste the effort and risk the lives of *billions*?”

“You’re lying,” Alastor whispered, blood turning to ice. The magic of his deal with Charlie was still intact. She was still alive. “Charlie won’t give up. She’ll never give up. That girl doesn’t stop fighting, even when all hope is lost in those around her.”

“She has been tortured continuously for over a year and she has felt every minute, every second of that year,” Alastor’s mother said solemnly. “She is in immense pain and misery and she is *broken*. The Root is keeping her alive because she thinks Lucifer will help her to escape, but the back door won’t let her through because the trials are stopping her.”

“Wait, what?” Vox asked. “She can’t get through the back door because of the trials?”

“No!” snapped Alastor’s mother. “Just as she has woven her magic through ours, we have woven our magic through hers. She is completely detained.”

“Then why has each rescue attempt failed?” Alastor demanded. “Why is Charlie still trapped?”

“Because The Root is wrapped around her. We must prevent The Root from escaping, thus, we must prevent Charlotte from escaping. The only way to reach her is to complete the trials.”

“Then you’re keeping her trapped,” Alastor growled. “Not Roo.”

“We are performing our function.”

“You’re letting her *die*,” Alastor hissed.

“It is a necessary sacrifice!” snarled his mother. “To protect billions of mortal souls. Would you be so selfish to sacrifice all of Hell, Earth, and Heaven in order to save *one* soul?”

“The Archangels can rebuild you. She won’t escape,” Alastor muttered as he gripped Vox’s hand and led him towards the stairs.

“The Archangels gave up months ago. They assume Charlotte is already dead. Lucifer is the only one - along with the lesser angel and a handful of sinners - that refuse to believe all hope is lost. If you finish the trials, she *will* escape and the Archangels will not be able to scramble together fast enough to imprison her.”

Alastor swallowed and stared at his mother for a long moment and her gaze softened as she reached for him. “Stay here, with me and your father. You could be happy here. We could be a family, the four of us. No more pain. No more suffering.”

Alastor’s heart ached. “You aren’t real.”

“Does it matter?” she asked. “As long as you’re happy? Your parents are in Heaven. If you complete the trials, The Root will reign down on them and cause them eternal pain and misery, but if you stay here, they will remain at peace in Heaven, and you and Vox could finally find contentment.”

Alastor inhaled sharply. He had forgotten about that. He had forgotten that in attacking Heaven, Roo would cause his parents to suffer.

He couldn't do that to them. Not after everything they had been through.

He pushed away from the stairs and headed towards his mother, then paused and glanced at Vox. His breaths shook.

"Tell me what to do," he whimpered.

Vox's gaze softened and he pulled Alastor gently into his arms. "She's right. It's a lot of potential sacrifice for one person. A lot of potential suffering. But it is only *potential*. We know that Charlie is suffering."

"And if Purgatory is right?" Alastor whispered. "If we get stuck here and unleash her upon all of Hell and Heaven and Earth? She'll destroy everyone we've ever cared about."

Vox's mouth pulled downwards. "Yes."

"What do we do?"

Vox glanced over at Alastor's mother before he sighed and dipped to lean their foreheads together. "I don't know," he admitted. "This is a nice place to live out the rest of eternity. As long as I'm with you, I'm happy."

Static bounced between them and Alastor wound his arms around his lover.

"And Valentino?" Alastor whispered.

Vox frowned. "If we complete the trials, we doom him to a life of nothingness. If we stay, at least he has the opportunity to live in his own happy bubble." He lifted a hand to Alastor's cheek and Alastor leaned into his touch, eyes slipping shut.

After a few moments, Alastor's brows drew downwards. "...We can't leave Charlie to be tortured."

Vox stroked his cheek with his thumb and Alastor met his gaze. Vox smiled, small and patient as Alastor briefly glanced at his mother again. He felt torn. What was he supposed to do?

Vox caught his gaze, one hand wrapping possessively around his hip as the other cupped his cheek. "Purgatory doesn't really know what will happen if we beat the trials, because it has never happened before," Vox whispered.

"We do!" Alastor's mother insisted. "We will cease to exist if you complete the trials and all the souls we saved will be thrown into the void. The Root will escape and reign pain and misery and sorrow upon your world."

"And how can you be sure if it has never happened before?" Vox asked.

"Because it is the logical course of events!"

Vox scoffed and shook his head before smiling at Alastor half-heartedly. "If I've learned anything in all my years of being part machine, it is that the logical course of events is rarely what actually happens."

Alastor blinked at him then huffed a laugh before tugging him towards the stairs. "Come then. Let's save the princess."

"You'll regret this," said Alastor's mother darkly.

"Maybe," agreed Alastor as they disappeared upstairs into his old bedroom.

They locked the door behind them and Alastor exhaled shakily as he looked around the familiar room. It was just as he remembered it, right down to the photos of old friends on the dresser. There were a *couple* of changes, like the picture of Vox and him at some sort of formal evening, and the television magazines stacked neatly on the bedside table that he definitely wouldn't read.

Vox looked around curiously. "This is... nice. Is this what our lives would have looked like if we had lived through the same time?"

"Perhaps," Alastor said as he inspected the photograph of the two of them. They looked happy.

"I would have liked this," Vox mused as he ran a finger over the dresser. "Would have been nice to have a family that cared."

A hand settled at Alastor's back and it occurred to him that Vox was being more physical than usual. He raised his eyebrows and glanced at Vox to find him smiling warmly at the photograph, longing in his human eyes.

Alastor's heart ached for his lover and he set the photograph down, fisted Vox's sweater, and dragged him in for a heated kiss. Vox responded immediately, pushing Alastor against the dresser and trapping him between his arms.

When they parted for air, Alastor splayed a hand over his lover's chest. "My parents would have adored you," he said quietly. "They would have treated you as their own son."

"Even though I'm defiling their precious little boy?" teased Vox.

Alastor chuckled and pulled Vox flush against him. "They might have had a few creative warnings for you, but none that they meant. They would see how happy you make me."

Vox dipped down and mouthed kisses against Alastor's neck and Alastor tipped his head back, tangling his fingers in dark, fluffy hair. Vox made a noise of approval and wrapped his hands around Alastor's hips, rubbing up and down his sides slowly.

"I make you happy?" Vox whispered against his neck and Alastor nodded, eyes slipping shut and he spread his hand over Vox's waist. With his other hand, he petted Vox's hair and his lover nuzzled into his neck before mouthing kisses against his jaw. "Fuck, you're gorgeous," Vox breathed as he carefully removed Alastor's spectacles and peppered every inch of his face in kisses.

Alastor captured his lips, kissing him roughly and Vox fisted his hair and kissed back just as hard. They pulled back for air, panting lightly and Alastor cupped Vox's cheek, admiring how his dark skin contrasted with Vox's paler tones. He cast his gaze to the mirror in the corner of the room and he swallowed thickly at the image of the pair of them - of Vox pressed against him, staring down at him with utter devotion in his mismatched eyes, fingers buried in Alastor's hair and shirt as though he never wanted to let go.

They looked stunning together.

Vox leaned down again to mouth hot, wet kisses against his neck and Alastor found his hand slipping under his lover's sweater, fingers curling into his warm back. His thumb brushed an old cigar burn and he growled angrily and held Vox tighter.

He inhaled when Vox suddenly hitched his legs onto his hips and he clutched at his lover instinctively as Vox deposited him on the dresser. He wrapped his legs around Vox's waist, drawing him closer, and Vox ravished his mouth, as he curled an arm around Alastor and slipped his other hand up the front of his shirt.

"Let me see," Vox growled into his mouth. "I want to see you."

Alastor propped himself up on his hands as Vox swiftly removed his shirt and stared at him in wonder, tracing gentle fingers over unblemished skin. Alastor leaned into his touch, surprised by his own neediness.

Vox swirled his finger around a dark nipple before brushing a thumb over it and Alastor arched into him. Vox watched him hungrily before pinching the little nub, and Alastor let out a soft huff of air.

“Fuck,” Vox whispered before he leaned down and lapped at Alastor’s nipple, sucking and biting whenever the temptation struck him, and Alastor let out a soft keen of want. He tugged Vox’s sweater over his head before smoothing his hand over Vox’s burned back and he pushed Vox away gently to take a look at him.

Unlike Alastor, Vox’s skin wasn’t unblemished. There were scars littered here and there from his parents’ abuse and Alastor trailed a feather-light touch over the old wounds as Vox watched him intensely.

“You are so pretty,” Vox whispered as he caught Alastor’s chin and swept his thumb over his plush lower lip.

“Then touch me,” Alastor purred as he nipped Vox’s thumb and smoothed a palm over his chest and stomach.

“Where?” Vox demanded.

“Everywhere,” Alastor breathed and Vox’s eyes widened for a moment before he dragged Alastor off the dresser and dropped him onto the bed, and Alastor lost his breath at the feeling of Vox manhandling him with so little effort. There was hidden strength in Vox’s slim frame.

Vox pounced on him, straddling him as his lips blazed a path over his stomach, and Alastor made a needy sound when Vox pinched at his nipple and worked a hand beneath his back.

He hooked his legs around Vox’s hips, rutting upwards into him, and Vox made a sound of encouragement and laved his tongue over Alastor’s ribs before nipping at his untouched nipple.

Alastor weaved his fingers into Vox's hair and splayed a possessive hand over his abused back and he ground hard against Vox's crotch, moaning quietly at the feeling of Vox's tented trousers against his own.

"Take them off," Alastor whispered and Vox kissed his mouth hotly before kneeling and hurrying to remove his trousers. Alastor watched hungrily as Vox's rapidly hardening cock was freed, and he reached for it, only to have his wrists pinned to the mattress.

"Ah-ah," Vox purred as he ground his bare cock against the bulge in Alastor's trousers. "Not until I see you."

Alastor struggled against him for a moment and Vox kissed him hard on the mouth, and their tongues slid together in a sort of fight as Alastor finally wrestled out Vox's hold and tugged at his hair.

Vox pinched his nipple roughly and Alastor made a noise of encouragement as he dug his fingers into Vox's bare hip, hard enough to leave faint marks. He squeezed Vox between his thighs and rolled his hips deliberately, and Vox curled a hand around the back of Alastor's neck, squeezing gently as he snaked his arm tightly around Alastor's back.

"Fuck, Alastor," Vox panted into his mouth. "Colour?"

Alastor nipped his lip. "Green," he growled. "Let me remove my trousers."

"Fuck that," Vox hissed before he squeezed Alastor's neck a little more firmly and used his free hand to fumble with Alastor's zip.

Alastor's eyes fluttered shut as he bared his throat further. This felt... good. There was passion and need behind their roughness and Alastor knew that he was *safe*. He was safe with Vox. They could explore new forms of intimacy and Alastor didn't have to worry about being pushed too far because Vox would never do that to him.

The hand left his neck and he gasped when Vox nipped and sucked at his thighs, hands gripping his waist as his thumbs circled over his hip bones.

Alastor sat upright and Vox sent him a narrow-eyed look and shoved him back down again by his chest, gripping his arms as he ground their dicks together.

Alastor inhaled sharply, gripping Vox's arms since he couldn't reach anywhere else whilst being restrained, and he threw his legs around Vox's waist, forcing them tighter against one another. He stole another searing kiss from Vox and wriggled a little beneath him, testing Vox's strength, and Vox nipped his lip in reprimand.

"Where do you think you're going?" Vox growled softly and a thrill shot up Alastor's spine and he arched, trying to press closer to his lover, desperate for Vox to keep touching him.

"Colour?" Vox demanded.

"Green," Alastor breathed and Vox released his arms and clutched Alastor's back as he latched onto his neck, sucking and biting and working a small hickey into his unblemished skin.

Alastor dug his fingers into Vox's back and fisted his hair, pulling sharply.

"Fuck," Vox hissed as he let his head fall backwards and he pinched Alastor's nipple hard in scolding.

Alastor shivered and released Vox's hair in favour of squeezing their dicks roughly and Vox made a strained sound and thrust into Alastor's fist. Alastor's neck ached deliciously and he gazed up at Vox, starving for more of his lover's touch.

Vox met his gaze and rutted into his fist again before snatching his hand away and hiking Alastor's legs over his shoulders as he nuzzled the dark curls above his dick. He pressed his

fingers into the soft flesh of Alastor's thighs and Alastor barely had time to moan before Vox was licking at him and swallowing him down like he was made for it.

Alastor clutched his lover's hair and fucked his mouth hard and Vox groaned in clear approval as he humped the sheets.

"Look at you," Alastor purred. "So good at taking me. So beautiful with your pretty lips stretched around my cock. Taking care of me. Making me yours. You feel so incredible, my dear."

Vox met his gaze, grinding faster against the mattress as he worked Alastor deeper and harder until the smaller man was panting.

"Damn, you're handsome," Alastor breathed, scratching his nails against Vox's scalp and eliciting a moan from Vox. Vox dug his fingers deeper into Alastor's thighs, hard enough to bruise, before he pushed a thumb into the crease of his groin.

Alastor arched and gasped when Vox began fondling his balls.

"Fuck me," Alastor begged. "Vox, *please*."

Vox's gaze snapped up to him and Alastor released his hair. Vox pulled off him with a wet *pop*.

"I want you," Alastor whispered. "Please fuck me."

Vox hesitated, then crawled up his body and kissed him gently. "Alastor—"

Alastor nipped his lip and thrust his tongue into his mouth, claiming every inch of him. He wrapped his arms around Vox's back and squeezed his ass. "Do it before I push you onto

your hands and knees and fuck *you*, ” he growled and Vox startled when Alastor smacked his ass lightly.

Vox narrowed his eyes and forced two fingers into Alastor’s mouth and Alastor nipped and sucked at him heatedly as Vox ground their cocks together once more.

He brushed his thumb over Alastor’s sensitive nipple and Alastor pushed into his touch, breath hitching when Vox rubbed his own nipple against Alastor’s.

“Beg,” Vox murmured against his mouth. “Convince me it’s what you want. Show me how desperate you are for it and *maybe* I’ll fuck you.”

“Please,” Alastor whispered. “I need it. I need you.”

“Not good enough,” Vox growled. “Convince me, Alastor, or I won’t even try.”

“I love you,” Alastor said quickly. “I trust you. I want you. I feel safe with you.”

Vox flicked his swollen nipple, flexed Alastor’s hips, and hooked his legs over his shoulders as he gripped their cocks and pumped them roughly. “Try harder,” he growled. “I don’t think you really want it.”

“I do want it!” Alastor protested, tapering off into a moan as Vox worked them faster. “I want to feel you inside me. I want to feel your heat. I want to hear you moan and curse. I want you to hold me and kiss me as you do it. I want to see you hungry for me. I want to feel loved *and* desired by you. I want you to cleanse me. I want you to be the only one I remember claiming me. I want your cock to be the only one I recall the feeling of.” He looked at Vox desperately. “I want you to fuck me, Vox. I want you to fuck me and ravish me and squeeze my nipples and pull my hair and bite my lips and pump my cock until I come, whimpering your name.”

Vox slid a finger down his perineum and pressed against the tight ring muscle below.

Alastor stilled in surprise and Vox teased his finger around the ring before dipping down to bite hard at Alastor's swollen nipple.

Alastor cried out in pleasure, squeezing Vox's ass as he wrapped his hand around the back of Vox's neck.

Vox hummed in approval and gripped Alastor's hip as he dove for his mouth. Their tongues slid together in a fierce war and Alastor squeezed Vox's neck as he smacked his ass a little harder and humped his cock, legs locked around his hips.

Vox's finger slipped inside him and Alastor froze, but Vox sucked his tongue insistently and smoothed a hand up his chest to toy with his nipples and Alastor lost himself to the sensations.

At first, Vox didn't move his finger at all, but then he slowly began to dip in and out of Alastor, grinding hard against his cock.

Vox twisted his nipple gently and Alastor arched.

"Colour," Vox muttered against his mouth.

Alastor hesitated, trying to catch his breath, and Vox began to pull out.

"Green," Alastor said hurriedly. "Green. I want more."

Satisfied, Vox pushed his finger inside Alastor up to the knuckle and Alastor let out a soft whimper. Vox slid his other hand beneath Alastor's back, supporting him, and Alastor moved his hand from Vox's neck to his back.

Vox pumped his finger in and out, grazing his prostate every so often, and Alastor whined and whimpered and squeezed Vox's ass in encouragement. Vox laved his tongue over his chest, nipping at his collarbone and peppering kisses over his shoulder and suddenly, there was a second finger inside Alastor, thrusting and curling and scissoring him open.

"Fuck," Alastor whined, planting his feet against the mattress as he lifted his hips. Vox quickly supported his waist and fingered him harder, slower, as he bent down to press his lips to Alastor's stomach.

Alastor gripped the sheets with one hand and Vox's hair with the other as his lover sucked and lapped messily at his cock.

"Vox, *please*," Alastor begged. "Please fuck me. I can't keep this up."

"You're doing so well, sweetheart," Vox murmured against his weeping cock and Alastor's chest filled with butterflies and he suddenly realised why Vox enjoyed being praised during sex. "But I'm not fucking you without lube."

Alastor threw out a hand towards the bedside table, tugging the draw open frantically as he blindly searched for his prize. He grasped the lube and a packet of condoms and held them out to Vox with a shaking hand.

Vox raised his eyebrows. "How did you know?"

"It's *our* room," Alastor hissed. "There had to be some somewhere."

Vox barked out a laugh before squeezing a generous dollop of liquid onto his fingers, ignoring Alastor's whimper at the sudden emptiness. Vox smeared the lube over Alastor's ass and it was cold, making Alastor jump.

"Sshh," Vox hushed as he plunged two fingers into Alastor once more, rolling a hand over his stomach and up to his chest reverently as he leaned down to kiss the hickey he had made

earlier. "I've got you, darling."

Alastor's eyes slipped shut as he tangled his fingers in Vox's hair and smoothed his palm over his back. He grimaced when Vox's fingers left him, then inhaled sharply when Vox's cock nudged between his ass cheeks, smearing the lube over himself and making a mess of the sheets.

"Relax," Vox whispered against his neck as he brushed the head of his cock over that tight ring of muscle. "We're going to go slow, okay?"

Alastor nodded and Vox kissed his neck before laying flush against him and rolling his dick around Alastor's entrance.

"Colour?" he whispered as he began to press inside.

Alastor gripped Vox's hair a little tighter at the burning sensation and squeezed his eyes shut. "Yellow."

The pressure eased and Vox smoothed the head of his dick up and down Alastor's perineum before circling his entrance once Alastor relaxed.

"Open your legs a little wider, sweetheart," Vox whispered, tapping Alastor's thigh where he had clenched around Vox's waist. Heat crept up Alastor's neck and he felt his resolve waver as he pushed his thighs apart.

Vox caught the falter in his expression and sought out his hand. He laced their fingers together and knelt above Alastor, still circling his cock lazily around Alastor's entrance.

"Touch yourself," Vox said softly. "I want to watch you."

Alastor licked his lips and slowly stroked himself and Vox hummed in pleasure.

“Fuck, look how gorgeous you are,” Vox whispered. “Laid out for me like a feast. You’re so damn pretty. Do you have any idea how you make me feel, Al? Do you have any idea how much I want you?” He released Alastor’s hand in favour of pinching his oversensitive nipple and Alastor arched into his touch with a keen of want.

“Fuck, do that again, Al. Make that sound for me again,” Vox breathed as he pinched Alastor’s nipple harder. Alastor whined louder and gripped Vox’s arm when his lover refused to release the little nub.

“Good buck,” Vox purred. “So good for me. So sweet. So delicious. Do you have any idea how amazing you taste? I can’t get enough of your cock, Al. Stroke it for me. Let me see you play with yourself. Let me watch you rut into your own fist. Let me watch you come, sweetheart.”

Heat flared in Alastor’s belly and he thrust into his own fist obediently.

“Such a good boy,” Vox praised as he stroked his own dick slowly. “How does it feel to know you’re adored? How does it feel to know that I can’t get you out of my mind? How does it feel to know how hard you’re making me, Alastor? You’re so fucking beautiful. Moan for me. Let me hear you moan, sweetheart.”

Alastor squeezed his own dick hard and moaned desperately as Vox put more pressure on his sore nipple.

“Fuck, that’s it,” Vox groaned as he rutted into his own fist, the head of his cock nudging against Alastor’s entrance. “Look how far you’ve come, Al. I’m so proud of you. You’re so fucking amazing. Listen to you, moaning so sweetly for me. You’re so needy and I love it. I love you.”

Alastor trembled as pleasure began to build and he watched Vox hungrily, watched his cock weep with every thrust, watched Vox’s brows furrow in barely restrained pleasure, watched his skin shine with sweat... Damn. He was stunning.

Vox shifted closer, still thrusting into his own fist, but with each thrust, the head of his cock pushed against Alastor's entrance and Alastor's breathing quickened as he squeezed himself.

Vox shifted again and Alastor groaned as the tip of Vox's cock pushed in and out of him.

"Colour," Vox managed, voice strained.

"...Green," Alastor choked out and Vox pressed a little deeper.

"Green," Alastor said again, relaxing into the sensation of being stretched as he toyed with himself and suddenly, Vox was over the top of him, kissing his lips heatedly and gripping his hair and hip as he pushed deeper and deeper in a steady rhythm.

Alastor gasped and kissed Vox hard as he continued to stroke himself, and he splayed his palm over the burns on Vox's back, moaning openly into his mouth as Vox fucked him.

"So proud of you," Vox hissed. "So fucking proud of you, Al. Come on. Come for me, sweetheart. Come on me. I want to watch."

Alastor arched and held Vox tighter and kissed him frantically as Vox claimed him, over and over, cleansing him of his attackers' filthy touches, of their foul fluids and humiliating words. Vox held him close and fucked him with purpose, and once he started hitting Alastor's prostate, Alastor was *lost* to him.

He came over Vox's stomach with a soft whimper and Vox grabbed both his hands, tangled their fingers together, and fucked Alastor harder, deeper, until Alastor was a moaning, whimpering mess beneath him.

Vox came with a groan and lay on top of Alastor, nuzzling his jaw and cheek and squeezing his hands.

Overwhelmed, a tear rolled down Alastor's cheek.

With a look of horror, Vox tried to pull out of Alastor, but Alastor gripped his ass quickly. "No!" he whined. "Don't leave me."

"I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart," Vox whispered as he swept the hair from Alastor's face and thumbed away his tears. "Tell me what's wrong?"

Alastor wrapped his arms tightly around Vox. "Nothing," he murmured as he buried his face into Vox's neck. "There's nothing wrong."

"Then why are you crying?" Vox asked as he snaked his arms around Alastor. "Did I push too far?"

"No," Alastor laughed weakly. "No, my dear. You were perfect. Everything was perfect. I'm crying because... because it's finally over."

Vox stiffened and Alastor clicked his tongue and squeezed him. "Not like that. I mean... There's not a single part of me that you haven't touched. Those men, my *rapists*... They can no longer claim any part of me. You've made me clean again. I... I feel... I feel like my body is *mine* again. I feel... *whole*."

Vox's gaze softened. "Alastor, your body has always been yours. They had no claim to it in the first place and they certainly didn't have any right to it after what they did to you."

Alastor smiled fondly and grazed his fingers over Vox's cheek. "I know. I know they didn't really *own* parts of me, but I can't help how I feel." He brushed his thumb over Vox's lip. "Thank you, Vox. For everything. For being so patient with me. For never giving up on me."

Vox blinked. "Did you just *thank* me for fucking you?"

Alastor grinned and Vox huffed a laugh.

“You’re so weird,” he said affectionately before he kissed Alastor’s head and pulled out of him.

Alastor whined softly and Vox shook his head in amusement and rolled them onto their sides, tugging Alastor into his body protectively.

“You’re so small,” Vox teased after a few peaceful moments and Alastor cracked an irritated eye open.

“I am average height for a man. You’re only slightly taller.”

“*Slightly?*” Vox echoed.

“Our demon forms are the same height.”

“Only because of your ears.”

“We are the same height.”

“You’re pocket-sized,” teased Vox as he hoisted Alastor’s leg over his hip and pulled him into his chest.

“I’m only a *few* inches smaller than you.”

“Handbag-sized. Like a Chihuahua.”

“Shut up before I use my sock as a *gag*. ”

“Kinky.”

Alastor pushed Vox onto his back with a soft growl and kissed him roughly. Vox melted into the kiss with a happy hum, petting Alastor’s back adoringly.

Alastor looked down at his newly sticky stomach with a grimace and Vox barked out a laugh at his expression.

“Shower?” Vox purred and Alastor gestured to the door to their right. Vox chuckled and carded his fingers through Alastor’s hair. “I meant: Would you like to take a shower with me, darling?”

Alastor smiled sheepishly before nodding, and he yelped when Vox effortlessly plucked him off the bed and carried him to the bathroom.

“I suppose being *slightly* smaller than you does have its perks,” drawled Alastor as Vox deposited him in the shower and stepped in close behind him. “Free transportation for one thing.”

Vox reangled the showerhead and flicked the spray on, laughing when Alastor leapt into his arms with a shout as the icy water hit him at full force. Alastor scowled at him and Vox turned, protecting Alastor from the cold spray as he peppered kisses over his neck. Eventually, the shower warmed up and Vox manhandled Alastor under the water, unable to keep his hands off his lover.

Alastor let Vox clean him up before he returned the favour and they dried themselves off, Alastor chuckling when Vox nosed into his neck, hands roaming over his naked body.

“My dear, we’ve *just* cleaned up,” Alastor said in exasperation but he didn’t move away or shrug Vox’s hands off himself.

“I like touching you,” Vox mumbled, hands sliding over his chest and down his stomach and dipping between his thighs and palming over his soft dick. “So pretty.” He pinched a sensitive nipple and Alastor caught his wrist with a reproachful look.

“I have a trial to complete.”

“Maybe that was your trial,” teased Vox. “Getting over your fear of me fucking you.”

Alastor quirked an amused grin and quickly rid himself of it before Vox could take notice. It was best not to encourage him.

“Whilst it was a pleasurable distraction, we really must be getting on with whatever I’m supposed to do here.”

Vox teased a finger over the head of his cock and Alastor caught both of his wrists and pinned him to the wall. Vox smirked impishly.

“Get dressed,” Alastor said, deliberately growling out the command merely to watch Vox’s gaze flash with interest.

“You are so dreadfully sexy, you know that?”

Alastor rolled his eyes and hunted for his clothes. “You’re quite handsome yourself.”

Once Alastor was fully dressed, Vox wrapped his arms around him from behind and nuzzled into the hickey he had created.

“You are insatiable,” sighed Alastor even as he closed his eyes and tilted his head to let Vox nip at his jaw.

“Can you blame me? Look in the mirror, Al.” Vox said as he splayed a possessive hand over Alastor’s stomach.

Alastor kissed Vox’s cheek. “You can have me again when we get *home*.”

“I’d quite like to make the most of being in our human bodies,” drawled Vox as he whirled Alastor around and kissed him soundly on the mouth.

Alastor weaved his fingers into Vox’s hair and pulled back with a fond smile. “As appealing as I find your human form, I do rather miss all that clever circuitry and those crooked antennae of yours.”

Vox’s cheeks flushed pink and he finally released Alastor. “Yeah, well... I kinda miss your ears and tail.”

“Splendid,” chirped Alastor. “Once we return home, we can-”

Bang.

Alastor stilled, eyes blowing wide and heart racing. That sounded like a gun shot. He turned slowly to the door, breaths shallow.

He stood frozen, listening, gaze fixed on the door as blood rushed between his ears.

Silence.

He swallowed and edged towards the door, but his fingers hovered above the handle as memories of a similar night from his human life came flooding back. He drew away from the handle, then scowled and pushed through.

He was older now. Stronger. Despite his appearance, he was still an Overlord of Hell.

He crept towards the bannister, Vox trailing him silently.

Bang.

He lost his breath as he watched his mother crumple to the floor, blood pooling around her prone form as three *monsters* stood above her with a gun.

Each monster was slightly different in appearance, but all of them had big teeth. One had too many arms and another had too many eyes and the last had *tentacles*. They were a mixture of reptilian and mammal and avian and they chittered and clicked and groaned at each other before all three of them lifted their heads to Alastor in unison.

Alastor gasped and retreated from the bannister and suddenly, the monsters were bounding up the stairs, roaring and screeching with their arms and claws outstretched.

Alastor's eyes blew wide and Vox gripped his shoulder and hurled him into the bedroom, locking the door behind him.

The monsters pounded on the door and the wood started to bend and crack.

"It's happening again," Alastor whispered as he backed away from the door and his legs hit the bed. His heart thundered in his chest and his breaths were uneven and his ears were filled with white noise.

Before he could register, Vox was herding him towards the window, opening it and pushing him through. He kept repeating a word, but it took a few moments for Alastor to focus on it and by the time he had, the monsters were through the door.

“*Run!*” Vox yelled and he shoved at Alastor’s chest, making him lose his grip on the sill. Alastor slid down the shallow roof and leapt onto the soft grass below, just as he had all those years ago and he stumbled backwards, watching Vox kick out at the monsters as he tried to climb through the window.

Every instinct in Alastor told him to run, to escape, but he couldn’t leave Vox. He couldn’t leave his lover to face what he had. “Vox!”

Vox swivelled to him with a wide gaze, punching the creature that grabbed his arm.

“Run!” Vox snarled. “I’ll follow!” He kicked both feet out at the monster that wrapped a huge claw around his waist and suddenly, he was free and tumbling down the roof. He jumped onto the grass, grabbed Alastor’s arm and threw him ahead of him and finally, *finally*, Alastor’s legs began to move.

The monsters ripped up the roof tiles in their descent and they galloped over the ground like horses, quickly closing in on their prey.

Alastor pushed himself faster, then realised with dawning horror that they were heading into the woods, just like last time. He tried to veer off, to race towards the town, but whichever way he ran, there were more trees and, faster than he could process, he was already surrounded by a dark forest.

He had somehow lost Vox in the chase and he looked around frantically, realising he was alone.

Branches cracked and crows cawed and there were ominous growls and chitters all around him. His breaths came faster and faster and his heart beat so loudly that he could *hear* it. There was a roar behind him and he took off like a hunted deer, hooves barely touching the ground as he sprinted through the woods.

His ears swivelled and his tail flashed white in panic and it occurred to him that he *was* a deer, but he didn’t dare stop, didn’t dare turn around to see what was following him. He ran and ran and didn’t stop when his muscles began to ache and burn.

He panted as he ran and his antlers caught on low hanging branches, slowing him down, and he shook his head wildly to free himself as the growls and clicks and the sound of thudding feet grew louder, closer.

He bellowed in frustration as he fought to free himself of the trees, but there were more roars and chitters and he realised that he had given away his location. He scrambled and bucked and finally freed himself, branches caught in his antlers, and he ran again, leaping over trees that fell in front of him and rocks that rolled towards him, trying to down him once more.

The cracking and chittering and thudding grew closer and closer and the spaces between trees got narrower and Alastor winced as his shoulders hit heavy trunks. Vines curled around his antlers and he sliced through them viciously, and roots reached out of the ground to wrap around his spindly legs, trying to break them.

He kicked and thrashed and ran but the vegetation soon grew too thick, too hostile, and Alastor couldn't run anymore as the roots dragged him to the ground and began curling around his legs. The vines wrapped around his antlers like serpents, holding his head up, forcing him to remain still as one of the monsters - this one with sharp teeth and fins sprouting from its back and a shark-like tail whipping dangerously from side to side - advanced slowly on him, claws outstretched and its teeth bared hungrily.

Alastor struggled against the plants, watching fearfully as the trees formed a sort of cage around them. He writhed and kicked as the monster edged closer, and his tail flashed in panic as he bellowed at the beast, then he was *free* and he was *running* and the monster was chasing him again, hunting him, roaring at him almost desperately, begging for Alastor to stop so it could *eat* and *hurt him*.

Another monster - the one with tentacles - appeared in front of him, knocking down young trees in its haste to reach him and Alastor skidded and raced in a different direction with two monsters following him.

No. Not two. *Three*.

The one with too many arms grabbed his leg and he crumpled to the ground with a terrified cry, kicking out at the grinning monster as it dragged him closer and straddled him and wrapped one of its many hands around his throat and-

The shark-like monster ploughed into the monster with too many arms and they rolled around the ground, clawing and biting at each other, scrapping over their prey like hungry wolves, and Alastor leapt to his feet and raced away, aware that the tentacled monster was still chasing him.

A tentacle shot out and jerked him backwards, and he collapsed again with a grunt of pain as his shoulder hit a sharp rock. The monster licked its crooked mouth at the sight of his blood and he staggered to his feet again, only for another tentacle to snake around his left forelimb and *break it*.

He cried out in agony and the monster wrapped another tentacle around him, then another, and Alastor was slowly dragged towards its gaping jaws.

There was a roar and a growl of pain from the tentacled monster and Alastor watched fearfully as the bloodied shark-like creature pounced upon the tentacled monster, obviously having subdued the creature with too many arms. They fought and snarled and Alastor crawled to his feet and hobbled away as fast as he could on three legs, and when he heard one of the creatures pursuing him, he pushed through the pain and hammered his broken limb against the ground in his desperation to escape.

He caught sight of the monster with too many eyes too late, and it rose from the bushes like a striking tiger, slamming him into the ground and sinking its teeth into his flank. He wailed and thrashed, and carved his antlers into its face. It snarled and set its great paw upon his shoulder, holding him still as it bit into his flank once more.

The shark-like monster bounded towards them, bloodied and with pieces of fins and tail ripped off, and it bared its teeth and Alastor squeezed his eyes shut because this was it, this was how he died. Hunted like a frightened deer, and he was going to suffer so much pain and agony and-

There was a clash of teeth and claws and Alastor snapped his eyes open to watch the shark-like monster and the monster with too many eyes battle, each desperate to have Alastor to

themselves, and Alastor staggered to his hooves and limped into the bushes, panting through the agony of his broken limb and mauled flank muscles. He hid a little distance away and watched the monsters fight, watched them tear at each other in their greed, and finally the monster with too many eyes crumpled to the ground in a bloody heap and the shark-like monster turned, searching for Alastor.

It roared and Alastor shrunk down amongst the shrubbery in fear, and ice settled in his veins as he suddenly remembered that Vox had been running too. Where was he? Had he been caught by the monsters? Had he also taken the form of a deer or was he still human? Was he still running?

The monster sniffed the air and lowered its muzzle to the ground and it approached Alastor slowly. Alastor swallowed and leapt to his hooves and limped away and the monster must have caught sight of him, for it growled and clicked and chased him, but it was also injured and it hobbled after him much slower than it had done earlier.

Alastor forced himself into a canter, wincing as his broken leg struck the ground, and he heard the monster push itself faster, grunting in pain as it did so.

Alastor bounced over a fallen tree trunk, but his broken limb couldn't take the landing and he fell in an agonised heap.

The monster slowed to a halt.

Alastor watched it in terror as he attempted to force himself upright. The monster stepped closer and Alastor staggered a few paces before wobbling and falling once more.

The monster stopped and sat down.

It frowned at Alastor and made no move to touch him.

Alastor stared at it with flat ears and tried to crawl away and the monster stood and followed him, keeping its distance until Alastor stilled again.

He looked at the wounded monster in confusion and it chittered at him softly.

It suddenly occurred to him that there had been four monsters chasing him, but only three at the house. The shark-like monster hadn't been present at the house.

He stared at the creature for a long moment and watched it shift its weight restlessly, claws tapping the ground as though itching to *touch* Alastor.

His eyes widened.

...Vox?

He tried to say the name but all that came out was a strained bellow and the creature cocked its head in confusion. It stepped towards him and Alastor instinctively crawled away from it, and it frowned and sat down again, tail thrashing behind it in what appeared to be frustration.

Was this really Vox?

It didn't smell like him or sound like him or look like him.

But perhaps it hadn't been scrapping with those other monsters out of hunger, perhaps it had been *protecting* Alastor.

He clambered shakily to his hooves and studied the creature. The monster frowned and looked at its claws and began to draw something in the dirt.

V

Alastor stared at the letter for a moment before his tail wiggled and he looked up at Vox in relief. He took a step forward and immediately collapsed with a grunt of pain.

Vox bounced to his paws and edged closer, then hesitated, seemingly afraid of spooking Alastor again. Alastor pricked his ears up and wiggled his tail again.

This was one predator he would let hunt and catch him.

Vox approached him slowly and Alastor could still feel a thread of fear at his sharp teeth and great claws, but he ignored it and let Vox slide those claws gently beneath him, lifting him to his hooves.

And suddenly, he was in Vox's very human arms, clinging to him, pressing their foreheads together as Vox rubbed his back reassuringly.

"You're safe," Vox whispered. "You're safe. I've got you. I won't let anything happen to you. I won't let them hurt you."

He pulled Vox against him and realised that every chase didn't have to end in pain and not every 'predator' wanted to hunt him.

He tucked his face into Vox's neck and closed his eyes when Vox carded his fingers through his hair.

Bang.

Vox cried out and fell heavily against Alastor and Alastor's breaths came quick and panicked as he checked between Vox's eyes instinctively before his gaze dropped to his chest instead. Finally, he glanced at Vox's legs and noticed blood soaking into his trousers at his right knee.

“Fuck,” Vox hissed, putting a hand to his knee, before his eyes widened. “Alastor!”

Hands slapped over Alastor’s neck and chest and stomach and arm as he was dragged away from Vox, and Vox balled up his fist and lunged towards Alastor’s captors, but then a gun was set against his temple and an arm snaked around his stomach, holding him steady.

Alastor thrashed against his captors, gaze focused on the gun as Vox stilled with gritted teeth.

“Looks like we have an audience this time,” drawled the man behind Vox and Alastor recognised that drunken voice and that ugly, worn face and his blood ran cold.

“Don’t touch him!” Alastor roared, struggling against his captors.

“Don’t worry, he’s not our type,” laughed one of the men behind him. “But you are.”

Alastor’s breath hitched as Vox whirled around and socked his attacker in the jaw. He staggered and Vox belted him again in the face before punching him hard in the stomach, and the man grunted and doubled over. Vox gripped him by the back of the neck and slammed his intact knee into his face, breaking his nose.

It was like a dance and Alastor watched in awe as Vox laid into the man who had raped him all those years ago, kicking and punching with precision, swinging him around like a ragdoll despite his shattered knee. Vox’s blows were powerful and calculated and he forced the man to the floor as he hit him, over and over until the man was bruised and coughing up blood.

Bang.

Vox stilled and tumbled onto his side, eyes wide and shocked as he clutched his stomach, and Alastor wrestled out of the other men’s grips as he staggered towards Vox.

Bang.

Vox jerked as a hole appeared in his other knee, shattering his kneecap.

“The next one goes through your head,” growled the bruised man as he clambered to his feet and aimed at Vox’s face.

Alastor threw himself over Vox protectively, chest heaving and body shaking.

“Alastor, he can’t kill me! Get off!” Vox shouted in alarm. “Self-sacrifice means he *can* kill you!”

“He won’t kill me,” Alastor whispered as he remained curled over Vox. “That isn’t the trial.”

Vox frowned in confusion. “I thought... You’ve already faced your trial, haven’t you? The monsters-”

Alastor shook his head and weaved his fingers through Vox’s hair. “That was just the first part. *This* is what I’m really afraid of.”

“...Them,” Vox murmured.

Again, Alastor shook his head.

“You seeing what happened and deciding to leave,” he admitted quietly.

Vox blinked. “...What?”

“Get on your knees,” growled one of the men.

Vox wrapped an arm around Alastor’s waist and cupped his cheek. “Al, I would never. I know what happened. You told me what happened. I’m still here, aren’t I?”

“Being told what happened and *witnessing* it are two different things,” whispered Alastor. “I don’t want you to see this. Please don’t look.”

Vox’s eyes widened.

“I said: get on your fucking knees, you filthy whore.”

Alastor hissed as the bruised man grabbed him by his hair and forced him into the dirt.

“Alastor, fight back,” Vox begged.

“Fight back and I put a bullet between his eyes, just like I did your mother,” growled the man as he slammed a foot against Alastor’s back.

“Let him waste the bullet,” snapped Vox. “Fight back, Alastor. You don’t have to take this.”

Alastor smiled bitterly and cast his gaze to Vox. “Now who’s being self-sacrificial?”

Vox swallowed and shook his head. “No, it’s different. It’s different because he *can*’t kill me. I’m not throwing myself over you or sacrificing my life to save yours.”

“No, you’re just telling me to fight back even if it means they’ll shoot you between the eyes,” Alastor said drily. “Sacrificing yourself to save my dignity.”

Vox fell silent and stared at the gun with renewed horror.

“That... That isn’t fair,” he whispered. “You can’t just... You can’t let them...”

Alastor stiffened as the other two men joined him.

“Tie the boyfriend up,” growled the bruised man. “Make it tight. Make sure he can watch the show.”

A rope appeared out of *nowhere* and Vox threw out his fist as the other two men approached him. The gun pointed between his eyes and he stilled, allowing himself to be tied to the nearest tree. The ropes pressed on the wound at his stomach and he hissed in agony.

“Strip,” ordered the bruised man as he coughed up more clotted blood.

Alastor trembled, keeping his face down.

He was kicked in the stomach for his disobedience.

“I said *strip*, damn it!”

Hands tore at his clothes and he squeezed his eyes shut as the nightmare repeated itself.

“I will never leave you over something like this,” Vox said gently. “Never, do you hear me?”

Alastor couldn’t bear to look at him as he was left naked as the day he was born. Vox was about to learn *exactly* what had happened. He would watch Alastor beg and cry and be

violated over and over and he would see how aroused Alastor got and how vile and filthy and perverted he was, and like Harriet, Vox would leave. He would leave because he would never be able to look at Alastor in the same way again, would never be able to touch him without remembering their hands on him, would never be able to kiss him without remembering what they had done to his mouth...

Tears dripped onto the grass as the men began to touch him, tracing the same paths over his skin that they had all those decades ago.

“Alastor, no matter what happens, I will *always* love you,” Vox said desperately. “I’ll never leave you. Please believe me.”

And right after Vox had made love to him too. Right after Vox had finally made him *clean*, here they were, soiling him, ruining him, washing Vox’s gentle, devoted touches away again.

“Al, for fucks’ sake, I won’t leave you!” Vox said desperately. “You have to believe me! Don’t let them do this to you! Fight back!”

“Fight and I kill your boyfriend,” growled one of the men and Alastor couldn’t be bothered keeping track of them anymore. What was the point? He already knew what they would do to him. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about where their hands were.

“Alastor, please,” Vox begged softly. “Please don’t let them do this.”

He flinched, turning away from Vox as the men forced his thighs apart. He couldn’t run and leave Vox to their mercy, and he couldn’t fight and watch them kill Vox. The best thing he could do was keep quiet and let them have their way with him and maybe, if he was very lucky, Vox wouldn’t be too disgusted, too nauseated, too *traumatised* by what he was about to witness and he would stay by Alastor’s side until at least the end of the trials.

Once they were back home, well, if Vox left him then, Alastor wouldn’t blame him. Perhaps they could keep in contact. Perhaps that was too much to ask.

Alastor gritted his teeth as one of the men forced into him and his nails bit into the dirt when his cheek was pushed deeper into the ground.

“No!” Vox cried out and Alastor could hear him writhing and jerking, trying to free himself of his bindings despite his shattered knees. “Leave him the fuck alone!”

There was a snort of laughter and Alastor squeezed his eyes tightly closed as a hand wrapped around his cock and another twisted his nipple painfully hard. The third man gripped his hair and yanked his head back and Alastor choked as a thick cock forced between his lips. Tears collected in his eyes as he heard them laugh and ridicule him. It was as he remembered - the taste of sweat and the stench of alcohol and smoke and their fingers bruising his sensitive, human flesh.

He could have been there minutes or hours as they had their way with him, pulling and squeezing and shoving at him, rolling him onto his back as they took more and more from him, all whilst Vox watched on helplessly, tears rolling down his cheeks as he squirmed against his bindings.

Alastor briefly wondered what this trial was supposed to teach him, before he decided that he was too exhausted to think and he flinched as they spat on his face and kicked him in the stomach and fucked him until he was sore and bruised.

He just had to wait for them to finish, then he could untie Vox and they could walk away.

...Except, what if they never finished with him? What if... What if this was it and they just kept raping him over and over because he couldn't figure out the trial? What if Vox was forced to watch for all eternity because Alastor couldn't figure out what he was supposed to do?

His eyes widened and his breaths came faster with anxiety and fear and he writhed beneath them and tried to escape, but they dragged him back with cruel laughter and took up new positions, hurting him, abusing him, *tainting* him.

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't *breathe*. He couldn't do this for all of eternity!

He clawed at the dirt and they kicked his face before pinning him onto his back as two dicks rammed into him. He cried out in pain and kicked out at them, but they forced his thighs wide and into an unnatural angle and he arched in discomfort, trying to ease the strain. A hand slammed into his throat and he choked, scrambling at it as the third man stroked himself to Alastor's pain.

He gagged and made a strangled noise and his chest heaved as he clawed desperately at the ground. The third man laughed again and released himself in favour of pumping Alastor's cock as he choked him and Alastor's face burned with humiliation and pain and fear and the corners of his vision began to fade from lack of oxygen.

"You're doing so well, Alastor," Vox said hoarsely, clearly upset. "I'm so proud of you sweetheart."

Alastor cast a wild-eyed gaze to him and Vox stared at him, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Take it easy, darling. Don't make it harder for yourself. I know it hurts, but try to relax."

Alastor's heart rate slowed a little even as he continued to tug at the hand choking him. He kept his gaze on Vox.

"You're doing well," Vox whispered. "I promise, you're doing so well. Letting them do that to you just to protect me. Facing your biggest fear to protect me." He smiled weakly. "I'm so fucking grateful, Alastor."

Alastor's breaths slowed.

"You're always protecting me," Vox continued. "You're always taking care of me, even if it means you get hurt in the process. You're so good to me, Al. And even after all that, after everything that's been done to you, you let me touch you and love you." Another tear rolled down Vox's cheek. "I'm so lucky to have you."

A boot crashed against Alastor's face, splitting his cheek open and he braced for the second kick, which also split his lip.

"I'd be a fool to leave you after all that," Vox continued, a note of anguish in his voice. "After everything we've faced together. After all the ways you protect me and take care of me. How could I *ever* leave you, Alastor?"

Alastor cracked an eye open to find Vox meeting his gaze, refusing to look away despite the horrors of what was being done to him.

"Try to relax," Vox whispered. "It'll hurt less."

Alastor did as suggested, keeping his gaze on Vox and, whilst it was by no means comfortable, it burned a little less.

"Don't you ever think this makes you any less of a man," Vox growled, eyes red-rimmed with distress. "Harriet was *wrong*. You *are* strong, Alastor. Sacrificing yourself like this to save me? That makes you so fucking strong. I'm so proud of you, Al. I'm so proud of how far you've come and I'm so grateful you came back to me. After everything that happened, you came back to me. Because you could have cowered in the shadows and left our relationship in the ash, but you *didn't* because you're *stronger* than that. There's a reason you're a fucking Overlord and it's because of *this*. Because no one else can do the things that you do. Because you're so strong and I fucking love you for it and I will *never* leave you, Al. I'll never leave you because you never leave me."

Alastor stared at Vox in wonder as affection blossomed in his chest. Affection and devotion and adoration and *anguish* and a hundred different emotions he felt for the man who was being forced to watch such a horrific scene.

He frowned.

Wait. Vox was correct.

He *was* an Overlord. A demon, not a human. This body was just an illusion.

He lifted his head, gaze darting around the dark forest.

He hissed as the third man gripped his hair again and shoved his cock into his mouth.

With a vicious grin, Alastor bit down.

The man screamed and Alastor spat out the bloodied remains of his severed dick.

The other two men between Alastor's legs froze as their friend tumbled onto his side, clutching his bleeding crotch, and Alastor kicked one of the men in the face before lurching upright and locking his hand around the throat of the second.

"I'm going to skin you alive," Alastor promised with a familiar grin and when the first man fumbled for his gun, Alastor summoned the shadows of the forest and commanded them to snatch the gun from his grip and throw it into the tallest branch of the nearest tree.

The man looked at Alastor in horror and Alastor cracked his neck threateningly, skin greying and antlers rising from his skull as dials swung erratically in his eyes.

The shadows snaked around two of the men, hurling them into trees and through thorny bushes and Alastor tightened his grip on the man whose throat he was crushing. Red claws stretched from his fingers and his body grew taller and *sharper*, and he grabbed the man's dick and ripped it clean off, eliciting a ragged scream.

"Aren't you having fun?" Alastor taunted as he pinned the man against a tree and raked his claws through his flesh, exposing muscle and viscera. "I thought you liked it *rough*?" He slammed the man face-down into the dirt and raked his claws through his back, severing his

spine. He waited for the man to stop screaming before slashing a claw through his throat and he watched the man gag and splutter as he bled out.

Alastor's ears swivelled to the trees and the other men being thrown between them like ragdolls by the shadows.

He released one of them when they neared the tree tops, and he crashed to the ground with a sickening *crack*. He twitched and cried helplessly, more than a few bones broken and one of his eyes ruptured, likely from a branch. His skin was torn by thorns and there was more purple than normal flesh.

Alastor recognised him as the man whose dick he had bitten off and he smiled sweetly, and grabbed the man's tongue, tearing it from his throat. The man's screams were muffled and Alastor trailed an elegant finger down his mangled chest before smashing his fist through his ribcage and pulling out his heart, which he crushed before the light left the man's eyes.

Alastor stood, pleased to see that his usual red-striped coat, shirt and trousers had made a reappearance. He straightened his cuffs and flicked an ear, and watched in amusement as the last man - the man who had *threatened* Vox - slammed between the trees. Alastor blinked slowly and the shadows receded as the man crashed into the ground.

Alastor sauntered towards his broken frame and kneeled above him.

"I'm not quite as small as I used to be," Alastor said gently, as though they were discussing the weather. "I'm not as helpless or naive. I'm not even *human*." He gave the man an unsettling grin. "You threatened to kill my lover."

"I'm sorry," spluttered the man, eyes wide with fear. "I- I didn't know-"

"You didn't know you would get *punished* for it?" Alastor hummed. "No, I don't suppose you did. You know, I killed you once before, out of revenge." He smiled darkly. "This time, I'm doing it for *fun*."

He summoned the shadows, letting them enter every orifice the man had - his mouth, his nose, his ears, his ass, his *eyes* - and they writhed and wriggled and slammed into him until he choked and sobbed and begged for mercy.

“You want mercy?” Alastor asked coolly.

The shadows wrapped around the man’s organs, squeezing until they tore and ruptured and melted, and the man screeched in agony before falling limp.

Alastor stood, looking down at the man in disgust as he straightened his jacket and stalked over to the still-human Vox. He slashed a claw through the rope and Vox stared up at him with wide eyes as he was freed.

Alastor shifted his weight, suddenly uneasy. “Look, I understand if that was all a little much, but in my defence-”

Vox threw his arms around Alastor’s legs, unable to stand with his broken knees, and Alastor stiffened.

“You are fucking incredible, Al,” Vox whispered.

Alastor swallowed and found himself relaxing a fraction. “Yes, well, I have to give you some of the credit, my dear.”

“I was *tied to a tree*.”

“You were... supportive,” Alastor said softly. “Very supportive. Thank you.”

Vox began to grow and twist into a new form and it wasn’t long before Alastor was staring at a familiar television.

Vox chuckled as he stood and cupped Alastor's cheek. "I'm proud of you, darling."

Alastor smiled and Vox leaned forwards to kiss him.

As soon as their lips connected, Alastor gasped and jerked backwards, ears falling flat as his heart raced with anxiety and memories of a thick cock shoving past his lips and-

Oh no. No, no, no! Not after all that work! Not after all of Vox's patience and their hard efforts to help Alastor work through his trauma. It couldn't have been for nothing! He couldn't be back to square one; flinching from every touch, panicking at the mere notion of a *kiss*.

His hand flew to his hair. *Shit!* He couldn't do that to Vox! After everything they had been through and he couldn't even let Vox *touch* him? The man he loved? The man he felt *safe* with?

The forest darkened and Vox turned and gasped, and Alastor followed his gaze, watching as the men began piecing themselves together, shifting and morphing into something more demonic, their eyes flying open as smiles crawled across their faces and-

He couldn't do this again! He couldn't fight them off again, not as demons, because that would make everything *worse* and he would never be able to let anyone touch him again and everything he and Vox had built together would be *ruined* and Vox would be so disappointed if he couldn't touch Alastor after everything they had been through to get to this point!

"Alastor!"

Vox would leave him. Vox *needed* touch. Craved it like oxygen. It would be unfair of Alastor to expect him to stay with a man that couldn't touch him, couldn't *love* him the way he wanted.

“Alastor, look at me!” Two hands cupped his cheeks and he was *trapped*. He was about to be pushed into the dirt and pinned down and-

“We’ll figure it out,” Vox said firmly and Alastor blinked at him, ears low and anxious.

“What if I go back to where I started?” he whispered.

“We’ll figure it out,” Vox said again, gently as he swept the dishevelled hair from Alastor’s face.

“I can’t kiss you,” Alastor whimpered, gaze shining with unshed tears.

“We figured it out before, we’ll do it again,” Vox murmured with a reassuring smile. “I’m not leaving you, remember? No matter what happens, no matter how many setbacks, we’re in this together, yeah? We support each other.”

The three demons clambered to their feet.

“What if I can never...?” Alastor mumbled.

“Then I’ll stay and find another way to love you,” Vox whispered. “This changes nothing. I wanted you when I thought you were untouchable, and I still want you now. How could I not?”

Alastor flicked his gaze to the approaching demons and scowled before returning his gaze to Vox. “You made me clean before. You can do it again. I *want* you to do it again.”

“That’s the spirit,” Vox said. “You and me? We can overcome *anything* together.”

They watched the other demons disintegrate and Vox blew out a breath of relief as the forest melted from the top down.

“Nearly had three parts to your trial,” Vox said with a hollow laugh and he placed a finger to Alastor’s palm and pulsed affectionate static into him.

Alastor’s breath caught and he realised how *easy* it was for Vox to adapt to Alastor’s needs.

Alastor *believed* Vox’s promises about staying, about figuring it all out together. They had done it once and they could do it again.

“Come on, let’s get you away from this place.” Vox hooked his little finger around Alastor’s and led him away from the dissolving forest.

Alastor stared at his lovely picturebox and laced their hands together with a smile.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Rape scene in the last third of the chapter. Gore.

Heavy chapter for poor Alastor! What do you think Vox's Fear trial will be...?

Chapter 61: Fear - Pt. II

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Once the forest had vanished, Vox squeezed Alastor's hand.

"You okay?"

Alastor took a long, slow breath and nodded. "Yes," he said firmly and Vox studied his face for a moment before smiling.

"Anything you want to talk about?"

Alastor dropped his gaze to their linked hands. "No. No, I think we've both said enough."

He squeezed Alastor's hand again. "You sure?"

Alastor slowly met his gaze. "I... I promise things will go back to the way they were, Vox. I want them to. I *want* you to be able to touch me freely and kiss me whenever you like. I want to be able to share myself with you. I *will* do those things again, I just..."

"Need time," Vox finished gently.

Alastor nodded and Vox quirked a grin. "I know you will, Al. You don't need to convince me."

“Things are different this time,” Alastor said with a determined frown. “I know I have your support. I know you won’t leave me when times are difficult. I’m not... I’m no longer *afraid* of them because I *can* fight back and I’m not the same man I used to be, and I know you won’t shame me for what happened because *you were there*. You reminded me of who, of *what* I am.”

“A badass Overlord who doesn’t take shit from anybody?” Vox teased.

Alastor’s smile widened. “...You truly love me unconditionally, don’t you?”

“Yep,” Vox said, popping the *P*. “Took you this long to notice, huh?”

Alastor frowned at their linked hands. “...I suppose it did. There was always that underlying fear that if you truly saw what happened that night...”

“That I’d pack my bags and leave you to suffer alone, like Harriet did?” Vox asked quietly.

“Yes.”

Vox frowned. “Al, like I said, I didn’t leave when you told me that first time. In fact, that was kind of the spark that brought us together again.”

Alastor’s smile was thin-lipped. “I know, but hearing about the past is a little different to *seeing* it. Witnessing the emotions of the moment, the trauma of it all, the instinctive reactions... I always thought if you saw me like that...” He rubbed his thumb over Vox’s knuckles. “I thought I’d lose you.”

“I’m here,” Vox murmured. “I’m right here, Al. And I’m not going anywhere.”

Alastor gazed at him for a long moment before lifting his knuckles to his lips in a sweet kiss. Vox's gaze softened.

"See? We'll get there," Vox said quietly. "I know we will."

Alastor exhaled in relief and Vox pulsed a burst of adoring static into his lover before looking around the void of darkness curiously.

"Hm. I wonder what my trial is?" Vox mused. "I wonder *where* it is?"

The emptiness seemed to stretch on forever.

Alastor suddenly let go of his hand and Vox turned to him curiously only to frown when he realised that Alastor was, in fact, still holding his hand. Yet, he couldn't feel it.

"What the...?" Vox turned his hand over, brushing his fingers against Alastor's palm and scowling when he couldn't feel *anything*. He released Alastor's hand and tried pinching his own fingers and when that didn't work, he dug his claw into the meat of his palm.

Nothing.

No pressure, no pain. It was as though his touch receptors had stopped working.

"Vox?" Alastor asked curiously.

Vox ran a system scan and was surprised to find that his touch receptors *had* stopped working. In fact, his entire nervous system - the parts that were involved in sensation at least - was non-functional, yet his scans couldn't diagnose the issue.

“My sense of touch is faulty,” Vox said with a frown and prickle of nervous heat at his neck. “The entire system has just... stopped working.”

Alastor cocked an eyebrow. “Show me?”

Vox glanced at him. “Already asking me to take my shirt off? What happened to needing time?”

“Oh, hush,” Alastor said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Something is wrong with you. Let me see the problem.”

Vox chuckled and wriggled out of his many layers and Alastor touched a couple of lights on Vox’s hip without hesitation. It was amusing to see how well Alastor knew his body and Vox bit back a chuckle.

His humour faded when Alastor pressed the same light he had just touched, only for nothing to happen.

“...Shouldn’t your circuit traces be lighting up?” Alastor asked, eying the markings on Vox’s skin carefully.

“Yeah,” Vox said quietly, worriedly. “Try a diagnostic check.”

Alastor pressed a few more lights and Vox’s skin flashed slowly with green light for a few moments before every circuit track lit up an ominous red.

Vox’s breath hitched and he ran a few more internal scans, growling when he couldn’t locate the issue.

Alastor narrowed his eyes and pressed another button, running a diagnostic check on Vox’s internal nervous system instead. Again, the parts associated with *touch* flashed green for a

few moments before becoming red.

“Shit,” muttered Vox as he scanned his processor and again failed to locate the problem.

Alastor ran a diagnostic check on his processor and the centre associated with touch lit up with red light.

“What does that mean?” Alastor asked slowly.

“It means,” growled Vox, “that every component involved with my sense of touch is offline for some unknown reason.

“Can you fix it?”

“Not if I can’t locate the problem and, frustratingly, all of my internal scans are telling me there *isn’t* a problem,” Vox muttered.

Alastor was quiet for a long time.

Vox looked up from his own red lights and found Alastor staring at him expectantly.

“What?” Vox asked.

Alastor moved his mouth and no words came out.

Vox stiffened. “...Say that again,” he whispered.

Alastor cocked an eyebrow and repeated whatever he had said and again, Vox couldn't hear it.

"I can't hear you," Vox said, panic creeping into his chest. He ran another internal scan and scowled when he was greeted with another system message that stated there were no errors.

Alastor frowned and touched more lights and Vox's red circuit tracks faded as his audio inputs and outputs flashed green. Then his inputs lit up red as his outputs switched to blue. So he could speak, but he couldn't *listen*.

"Fuck," growled Vox. "What is this? Is this the trial? Slowly dismantle me one system at a time?"

Alastor looked at him worriedly and Vox waved him off. "I'm not frightened of being dismantled. I'm past all that. That can't be the trial."

Alastor relaxed a fraction.

Vox's screen went dark.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Vox snapped as he tensed. "I'm blind. Al, I'm blind!"

And deaf. And without a sense of touch.

There was no response from Alastor.

"Al?"

Nothing.

Had he vanished? Had he been taken? Was Vox alone; blind and deaf and *vulnerable*?

No. No. Alastor was likely still there but Vox couldn't feel him or see him or hear him.

He took a breath and focused on the scents around him.

And realised he had also lost his sense of smell.

“Shit!”

His lungs heaved and his heart raced and he clutched at his bare chest only to realise *he couldn't feel it*.

His breathing grew faster, shallower as panic set in. He couldn't cope without his senses. He couldn't face the isolation, the emptiness.

“Alastor, help me,” he tried to say, but his vocoder failed, producing nothing but pure white noise.

He staggered backwards, terrified. He couldn't communicate. He couldn't see. Couldn't hear. Couldn't touch.

A critical error popped up in his internal messages and Vox suddenly lost control of his limbs. He collapsed and couldn't feel the impact, and when he commanded his body to get up, he was met with a wall of resistance that looped back to him. He ran an internal scan, snarling in anger and desperation when the scan returned with no issues.

He had no sense of where his body was or where Alastor was - if he was even there. He was trapped in a biomechanical prison - his mind the only piece of him still functioning correctly.

Even his chronometer had stopped working, leaving him with no sense of time.

He screamed and all that was produced was more white noise.

How long would he stay like this? Cut off from sound and touch and colour? How long would he remain suspended in this empty space between life and death? Was this what it felt like to have one's soul extinguished? Was this what those floating aimlessly through Purgatory felt after destroying their own souls, or were they entirely at peace, their minds long ceasing to function?

With a sense of dread, Vox checked his vents and found them operational.

Fan-fucking-tastic. So, he could suffocate himself to death or overheat himself to the point of self-destruction. They were the only physical actions he could undertake? Purgatory had a crappy sense of humour.

No, he wouldn't off himself. He had to figure out how to beat this trial.

He was senseless and paralysed and it was his greatest fear, but Alastor was here and he had to complete this trial for him. For *them*.

...Was Alastor still there?

He sent a burst of static and received nothing in return.

His fans worked faster. Was that because his sensory inputs had failed or was that because Alastor was gone? Which pathway did static take again? Was it sensation or was it an autonomic input that bypassed the other pathways and went straight to his processor because it was pure *charge*? In that case, wouldn't he still be able to feel any responding static from Alastor?

He couldn't remember. He ran a search request to check, but the request failed because too many components were offline.

He sent another command to his limbs but the command hit another wall and bounced back to him.

"Alastor," he said, frustrated when his vocoder failed again.

What was he supposed to do here? He couldn't move or talk or listen or see. How was he supposed to beat the trial if he couldn't *do* anything?!

His fans became noisier as his panic and frustration and desperation grew.

Why wasn't Alastor helping him?

Maybe he couldn't help him. Maybe he didn't know how to - Vox's systems were extremely complicated after all, and the diagnostics were showing that his systems were offline, but they weren't showing him *why*, and Vox's internal scans displayed no issues either. So maybe Alastor couldn't fix him, because by all accounts, there was nothing to fix.

So, what was he supposed to do?!

Calm. He had to remain calm. Think about the problem logically.

Which parts of him *worked*? He knew his vents worked. He could send pulses of static into the surrounding air. What about his biological systems? Were they still functioning?

He ran a couple of tests and found that yes, his organs were still intact and functioning as expected - apart from his lungs, which lay dormant whilst he used his mechanical ventilation system. What about his antennae? Could they receive any input?

He ran a scan and found that no, they were also offline. He was in some sort of induced coma, but his mind and biological processes were in working order. So, how could he wake his mechanical system up?

...It was so quiet. Eerily so. He convinced himself that he could 'hear' his fans working, but in reality it was only because he *knew* they were running. When he focused, he couldn't actually hear anything at all.

He wouldn't even be able to feel it if something ripped him in half. He wouldn't be able to feel if a monster swooped in and began eating him because all pain and pleasure and hot and cold receptors were offline. Someone could melt him and he wouldn't feel it. He could overheat himself and he wouldn't feel anything.

He would receive error messages, sure. But that was different to actually *feeling* what was happening. Machines could detect when something was wrong but they couldn't *feel* anything. In this state, Vox was practically a machine.

No, he couldn't think like that. He'd been through all this. He *wasn't* a machine. He had a mechanical side, but he wasn't a mere machine.

A software issue, perhaps? Start there. Maybe it was a simple fix - as simple as a reboot.

He rebooted his systems, felt his mind slow to a stop.

He woke up a few seconds (minutes? Hours?) later and allowed his systems to warm up again. He ran a few internal scans, irritated when they yielded the same results. Offline, but no issues reported.

A hard reboot then? Restart in safe mode with limited functionality? Perhaps then he would regain basic sensation and limb movement.

Hard reboots took longer (hours? Days?) but usually not *too* long. He waited for his systems to online then panicked when his commands to scan his components failed. He attempted a diagnostic scan instead and that also failed, as though he had never sent the command in the first place.

So, he had no way of even checking his own functionality now.

His fans whirled faster as his temperature started to climb.

Now what? He was alone, no way of communicating, *broken*. Damn it! Why had Hell made him so mechanical? Why couldn't he be an animal sinner? He wouldn't have to face anything like this if he had woken up with a brain instead of a processor! Now he was going to be stuck in an induced coma for all of eternity in a dark void of *nothingness* and he had condemned Alastor to getting trapped with him because he couldn't progress whilst Vox was *offline*.

Alastor would grow to resent him eventually. Would grow to hate him for the mechanical parts he had once claimed to love. Alastor would leave him - and rightly so - in an attempt to escape Purgatory, or at least find a way to progress to the next trial, and Vox would be alone again, just like he had been in life, just like he *always* was. Everyone eventually abandoned him.

He was getting inside his own head. He needed to stop that. Needed to find a way out of his predicament.

A physical fault. Some sort of break in his circuits or a snapped component. That could account for why his scans weren't picking up on any issues. Maybe.

He sent a single pulse of electricity from his processor through his nervous system, following the signal carefully along every wire, over every circuit board, through every component, and to its end point - his skin circuit traces and receptors. When the signal petered out at its end destination, Vox sent another pulse through an adjacent pathway, once again following it to its final destination.

It was a long, dull task and when Vox finally finished, he was frustrated with the lack of results. No physical connection interruptions.

He would have screamed in anger if his vocoder was functioning. Instead, it spat out grating static.

How long had he been here? It was maddening having no sense of time. Not that time meant much in Purgatory - but *still*.

What was he supposed to *do*? What was he supposed to reflect on? How much he hated being cut off from the world? How much he despised losing his senses and becoming *paralysed*? How much he loathed being trapped with his own spiralling thoughts?

How was he supposed to beat this?!

Was Alastor still there? Or had he given up on Vox? Left him when he realised he wasn't getting any responses? It could have been days, weeks, *months*. Vox didn't know, had no way of checking.

His internal messages flashed up a warning. He was getting too hot. Vox couldn't feel it, so why should he care? Let his systems melt. Maybe then they'd actually *do* something.

His frequency was erratic - the only part of him moving far more than it usually did. Up and down, up and down. Distressed. Frustrated. Terrified.

He only had two options: remain immobile and isolated for the rest of eternity, or close his vents and let himself burn up.

It wasn't fair. They had been so close. Alastor had beaten his fifth trial and once again, Vox wasn't strong enough. He was holding his lover back. Dooming him to a life of eternal misery.

Vox was good at disappointing the people he cared about.

He'd screwed up with Valentino and he'd screwed up *twice* with Alastor.

No wonder people didn't stick around. No wonder everyone hated him.

If he died here, would Alastor be able to progress? It would make sense. He had no way of asking Purgatory though. What if Alastor got trapped between trials because the gates wouldn't open if one of the party failed? That's what had happened earlier. Alastor's light had turned green but Vox's hadn't and the gates had remained locked.

But Vox hadn't *died* then. Maybe the rules changed when a member of the party died.

No.

No, he couldn't think like that.

He had to find a way out. Had to force his systems online. What if- No, that wouldn't work. Oh! He could- No, that wouldn't work either. Could he- No.

Damn it! What the fuck was he supposed to do?!

...He was going to die here, wasn't he?

He was going to rot with the other corpses because he wasn't strong enough, wasn't *clever* enough to find a way out.

All that talk of a happy ending, of being with Alastor in Hell, of saving Charlie and Valentino, of finally finding *contentment*... It was all a lie.

Why did he think he would be able to do what others had failed? Purgatory had *warned* him. They had told him what would happen, that they would stop at *nothing* to prevent Roo's escape, and this was a pretty efficient way of stopping Vox. Target his mechanical side. Technically it wasn't 'killing' him, but it was as close as Purgatory could possibly get. He had been so naive to think that he would get through these trials - he hadn't even been able to pass one on his own and now that Alastor couldn't reach him, here Vox was, failing once again at the first hurdle.

He was so pathetic. Weak. He had always needed the support of others, *craved* their love and affection because he couldn't achieve anything by himself. It was a wonder Alastor wasn't already *tired* of him. He was so needy. Always wanting to be in the limelight because he had never had enough attention as a child.

He should give up. If he self-destructed, at least Alastor would have a *chance* at progressing. He could give his lover that much at least. It wasn't as though he was much use now.

He despised the silence. Always had. It was suffocating. Eerie. It was proof of being entirely alone. Abandoned. Silence meant no one cared enough to stay.

He had never hated the dark quite as much, probably because he had never seen true darkness in his human life - the city lights were always so *bright*. But now, the darkness haunted him, choked him, wrapped him in a cold embrace and promised him it would all be over soon, that there was *nothing* left for him here.

However, the worst thing about all of this was his inability to *feel*, to touch and be touched. It was his greatest fear. After being hit and burned and spat on by his parents and convincing himself that those were *loving* touches, after letting himself be smacked around during sex because his mind was so messed up that he thought that's what affection looked like, after searching for touch in the worst places and then finally receiving the *right* sort of touch from Alastor; tender and gentle and devoted, after convincing himself that *maybe* he could have the affection and love he had always craved... and now it had been snatched cruelly away from him.

He would never feel a gentle touch again.

He wanted to vomit. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. He wanted someone to hold him.

But he would never be able to do those things again. Would never feel or hear those things again.

Would never see Alastor's warm gaze again.

His vocoder produced a wretched, error-riddled sound and Vox couldn't hear it.

This wasn't living. This wasn't *anything*. At least death would be peaceful.

He closed his vents, allowed his temperature to climb.

He couldn't run any diagnostic scans so he couldn't tell whether his components were melting. He wished he could.

His frequency settled as he accepted his fate. There was no fear in death. Once he was dead, he wouldn't care about sound or colour or touch. He wouldn't care about anything. He would merely cease to exist. He was so tired. Exhausted.

A frequency *grated* against his.

It was urgent, frantic, *desperate*, and it wasn't Vox's.

Now that Vox's frequency had settled, he could feel the second frequency, strong and insistent, like it was probing for some sort of response from him. Or perhaps it had already

had its response? Vox's frequency had been quite erratic in the last... however long he had been stuck like this.

He focused on it, tried to calm it, but it was panicked, upset, and Vox quickly recognised it as Alastor's.

He dropped his own frequency to a low thrum, trying to soothe Alastor, but Alastor's frequency suddenly sky-rocketed in distress to an almost ultrasonic pitch.

The frequency had every system of Vox's glitching and as Alastor's apparent panic grew, his frequency got stronger, oscillating faster and faster into the ultrasonic spectrum and *past it*.

And *damn* it was *painful*. Vox's claws bit into his palms.

...*Wait*.

Vox raked up his own frequency to match Alastor and *fuck*, it was *agony*, but pain was good, because pain meant something was working and Purgatory might have targetted his mechanical side to stop him from progressing, but it was going to be that same mechanical part of him that *saved* him.

The high frequencies had every component inside Vox vibrating and being manually forced into action and he pulsed electricity through every cable and every circuit board, sparks leaping dangerously off each wire and component.

And suddenly he could see and hear and feel and *oh fuck*, there was so much agony! He was *on fire!*

He forced his vents open and a plume of smoke billowed out from them. He coughed and spluttered and Alastor was *holding* him, forehead against his screen and fingers digging tightly into his sides, and how long had he stayed like that for?

Alastor tore away from him at the sound of his coughing, eyes wide and haunted, and he laid Vox gently on the floor and touched a light at his hip, turning his skin transparent. Alastor stared at his internal components with a horrified expression and Vox managed to glance at himself to see his electronics half-melted.

Vox commanded his fans into overdrive, quickly cooling his systems, and Alastor slowly lifted his gaze to Vox's face.

His expression grew furious. "Idiot!" he snarled and Vox jerked in surprise as Alastor gripped his arms tight enough to hurt.

"Asshole!" Alastor seethed, fingers pressing bruises into Vox's flesh. "Air-headed, scrap-metal, piece of *shit*!"

Vox's eyes widened as Alastor's ears flattened. Was this still part of his trial?

He coughed when Alastor shoved at his chest and his lover's face cycled through various expressions - fury, surprise, guilt, distress, then back to outrage. He curled his fingers around Vox's shoulders.

"I almost *lost* you, *forever*," Alastor snarled and his eyes flickered between dials and regular pupils and irises. "You nearly-" He gritted his teeth and pinned Vox's shoulders against the ground. "Fucking moronic television!"

Vox's voice glitched as he spoke. "I- I thought-"

"You thought *what*?" roared Alastor and his gaze was suspiciously shiny. "You thought you'd just *give up*? You thought you'd give up after all the *shit* we've been through? You don't get to fucking give up!"

Vox blinked. "I'm sorry. I thought- I couldn't see how-"

"You said we'd *figure it out*," Alastor hissed as he suddenly straddled Vox, pinning him more heavily to the floor as his chest heaved with anger and upset. "You *promised* we'd figure it out together and then you just... You shut your vents and..." Alastor bared his teeth. "You weren't paying attention. Why weren't you paying attention? I tried to calm you, tried to intertwine our frequencies to let you know I was here, that I was trying to *help*, but you weren't *listening* and your frequency was so erratic and it only settled when you were trying to-"

He shook his head and his claws bit into Vox's shoulders. "You *promised*," he choked out. "You promised you wouldn't leave me. That we were in this together to the end. You *promised*, Vox."

Vox swallowed thickly. He had promised that.

"You said we could overcome *anything* together," Alastor growled. "And then you... You just..."

"I'm sorry," Vox repeated softly.

"That's not fucking good enough!" Alastor snarled as he shoved at Vox's shoulders, still keeping him pinned. "*Sorry*, isn't good enough! I had to watch you attempt to kill yourself, you useless piece of-" He cut himself off and suddenly surged downwards and crushed his lips against Vox's.

He gripped the edge of Vox's screen and dug his claws into his bare shoulder and he trembled and scowled and pressed his entire body against Vox's in frantic desperation.

Vox petted a flat ear before wrapping an arm around Alastor and cupping his cheek.

When they parted, Alastor leaned his forehead against Vox's screen and released a shaky breath. "Just because you can't hear or see or feel, it doesn't mean you're alone," Alastor whispered. "There are so many people who care about you, who would never abandon you, even in your most vulnerable moments."

Vox tangled his fingers in Alastor's hair, tightening his hold on his middle. "I couldn't *feel* anything," Vox murmured. "Every sense just... gone. Alastor, I can't... I can't cope with that. I've never been able to cope without touch, you know that."

"You did it for me," Alastor whispered. "When I couldn't touch you, you managed. You couldn't feel me, but you knew I was there, that I cared for you. Why is this any different?"

"I could see you and hear you," Vox protested. "I couldn't even *move*, Al."

"Just because you couldn't feel it, it doesn't mean I wasn't holding you," Alastor said firmly. "I held you close and watched you almost *die* in my arms and there was nothing I could do about it because you *gave up*."

Vox fell quiet for a few moments and pulled back to look at Alastor's frowning features.

"You saved me," Vox said quietly. "If it hadn't been for your frequency, I would have..." He trailed off as Alastor's ears lowered angrily.

"I *figured it out*," Alastor growled. "Like *you* said we would. Because just as you promised never to give up on me, I promised to never give up on you." Alastor's eyes narrowed. "You broke that promise."

"I wasn't giving up on you," Vox protested, temper beginning to rise. "I was giving up on myself! On a meaningless life of emptiness and silence and darkness. I thought if I died, you'd at least have a chance to get out of here! Because I knew I wouldn't be strong enough to beat my biggest fear!"

“Why are you so quick to belittle yourself?” Alastor snapped. “What kind of life would that have left me with? Watching my happiness die in my arms as I begged him to keep fighting? The same way you begged Valentino! The same way you begged me! You’re a fucking hypocrite, Vox!”

Vox shoved Alastor off him with a snarl. “I was fucking scared!” he shouted.

“So was I!” Alastor yelled back. “And I fought anyway!”

“You weren’t the one who lost all his senses and the ability to *move*,” Vox snarled and Alastor bristled, the fur on his ears standing on end.

“I was talking about the men in the forest!” Alastor snapped.

Vox fell silent as Alastor glowered at him.

“There is *always* a way to beat these trials,” Alastor growled. “Even if it means facing your fear head on.”

“I can’t overcome my fear though,” Vox muttered. “I’ll *always* be afraid of losing my senses. Of losing the ability to *feel*.”

“And do you think I’ll ever suddenly stop being afraid of the possibility of being *raped*?” Alastor hissed. “Do you really think that trial took that fear away? I’ll always be *terrified*, Vox. Overcoming your fear doesn’t mean getting *rid* of it. It means fighting back *despite* being afraid. It means figuring out how to regain control of your own body despite being afraid that you lost control in the first place. It means not letting your fear *win*.”

Vox averted his gaze, heat creeping up his neck in shame.

A set of closed gates appeared.

“Which you figured out, eventually,” Alastor growled as he stood. “You figured out how to face your fear before you managed to kill yourself.” He strode past Vox, ears low, not looking back to see if Vox was following him. “Congratulations.”

It was a hollow victory. Vox stood, wincing at the pain of melted components. He managed a few steps before the commands to his legs failed and he crumpled to the floor, his legs refusing to respond. His screen flickered before giving out and he lost sensation in the lower half of his body.

He sighed and bowed his head, hearing Alastor come to a halt.

He understood now.

“Can you help me?” Vox asked quietly. Face his fear. Find a way to overcome his blindness and loss of sensation and immobility even though he was afraid of those things. “Please, Alastor?”

He heard footsteps approaching before his hearing cut out and he felt Alastor’s hand curl around his arm and tug him upright before he lost sensation to the rest of his body.

He couldn’t feel if Alastor was managing to carry him and he couldn’t feel where his legs were or whether they were moving, but he understood now.

Facing his fear didn’t mean ridding himself of it, it meant having the courage and determination and patience to work out how to regain control of his body. It meant asking others for help. It meant trusting the man he loved to take care of him when he was vulnerable. It meant believing his own words that he and Alastor would ‘figure it out’, no matter what happened.

A bell rang and Vox could hear it.

The gates opened and five green lights appeared on each pillar, and Vox could see them.

Vox gently peeled himself off Alastor and they stepped through the gates in a tense silence.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Suicidal thoughts

A heavy lesson for Vox... Despair up next.

Chapter 62: Despairing But Not Without A Plan

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Vox winced at the burning sensation in his wrist and glanced down.

Despair.

The last trial. The last obstacle. If they beat this, what would happen? Would Charlie simply be released? Would they fight Roo? Would they regain access to their powers once Purgatory's 'programming' was terminated? How would they get out?

Would they even beat the trial? Vox had been very close to ending it all in the fifth trial. Would he be strong enough to make it through the final trial?

He grimaced at his own thoughts and glanced at the silently seething Alastor. His ears gave him away. Like the wings of an aeroplane. He had never been very good at hiding his emotions around Vox.

Vox opened his mouth to say something, to smooth things over, to *fix* whatever he had broken between them, when *Charlie* suddenly appeared in front of them.

Alastor's ears pricked up and he started forwards, only to hesitate and observe Charlie carefully. Vox understood his reluctance to approach. Charlie was *pristine*, not a hair out of place, and she watched them solemnly, her usual enthusiasm absent.

She didn't look like someone who had been tortured for a year.

"This is your final opportunity," she said and there was something *off* about her tone - an unusual echo behind her words. "We can give you peace. Happiness. Stop fighting and take our offer."

Alastor growled softly and retreated a step. “No.”

“This path won’t end well,” said Charlie firmly. “The Root has been watching. She senses a weakness. She will use it.”

“What weakness?” Vox asked.

Charlie glanced at him darkly. “The next trial will leave you vulnerable. She will take advantage of that.”

“She needs us to beat the trials to free her,” Alastor growled.

“She needs *one* of you to beat the trials. After that, our programming will complete and we will cease to exist. You will be left fighting alone.”

“We’ll be left fighting together,” Vox said and Alastor shot him a brief glance before returning his gaze to Charlie.

Charlie scowled. “You underestimate her. She will have no use for you once the trials are complete.” She glanced at Vox. “Especially you, since you no longer wear her chain.”

Vox frowned. “Trust me, we aren’t underestimating her. We’ve seen what she’s capable of. But we need to rescue Charlie. It’s what we came here for.”

Charlie bared her teeth. “You’ve seen but a *fraction* of what she’s capable of! She will ravage your world! Stop now! Your princess is almost dead and if you finish the trials, The Root will *destroy* her anyway!” She gestured between them. “Your bond is weakening. The trials are straining your relationship. Stop now before you *lose each other*.”

Alastor glowered at Charlie but gave Vox an irritable look. “Our bond isn’t weakening. He’s just an idiot and I’m angry.”

Vox shot him an apologetic expression before hooking his little finger around Alastor’s. Alastor snatched his hand away with a soft growl before pulling a face and allowing Vox to try again. He didn’t pull away the second time and Vox let out a soft breath of relief.

“We *will* stop you,” Charlie promised lowly. “You can’t be allowed to free her.”

“You keep saying that,” Alastor said drily. “Yet you keep failing to meet your promises.”

Charlie turned to Vox and she seemed to stare directly into his soul. He shifted uncomfortably.

“We’re almost there,” she whispered ominously before dissolving into the darkness.

Vox realised that Alastor was staring at him and he glanced at him, frowning when Alastor narrowed his eyes and released his finger before marching into the darkness.

“Alastor, I’m sorry,” Vox said as he trailed after his lover.

“You’ve said that already,” grumbled Alastor.

“Yeah, well, I really mean it,” Vox sighed.

“Hm.”

Vox scowled and caught Alastor’s arm, whirling him around. “Just stop, would you? Sulking isn’t going to help us.”

“Sulking?” Alastor hissed, fur bristling. “I am not *sulking!*” He poked Vox roughly in the chest and Vox realised that all of his clothes had returned to his body and his electronics were back in working order. Huh. When had that happened? “I am merely *infuriated* by the fact that the man I trust with my *life* decided to give up on me.”

Vox’s shoulders slumped. “I wasn’t giving up on you. I was giving up on- Look, I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“And how can I trust that now?” Alastor snapped. “How can I trust *you?*”

Vox stiffened as Alastor glowered at him, chest stinging. “...Alastor-”

“You’ve said enough,” Alastor growled before turning on his heel and marching away again.

For a moment, Vox’s airways felt too tight to breathe, and he raced after Alastor, whirling him around once more. “That isn’t fair. After everything we’ve been through, I make *one* mistake and you throw that at me? ‘*How can I trust you?*’ I was scared, Alastor. I thought it was the only way to let you progress.”

“And how can I trust that you won’t do it again in this trial?” Alastor snapped. “How can I trust that you won’t give up when things get difficult? Because when you give up, Vox, you’re *abandoning* me. You’re abandoning everything we’ve worked so hard for. You’re turning your back on me, just like you did all those years ago when I begged you to believe that I was being possessed.” He narrowed his eyes at Vox. “I was a fool to think you’d changed.”

Vox straightened then clenched his fists as his heart ached. “No, you know what? Fuck you! I made a mistake. You don’t have to beat me up about it - I’m already beating myself up. And that’s so fucking low bringing that night back into it. What happened to forgiveness, huh? What happened to *unconditional love*? And *I’m* the hypocrite?”

Alastor gritted his teeth and yanked his arm from Vox's grip. "What happened to 'figuring it out together'? What happened to 'we can do anything together'? You are so full of *shit*."

"The fuck is wrong with you?" Vox snarled. "We're on the last trial - you know, the one that no one ever passes, no one even *reaches* - and we've just been *threatened* by Purgatory, Charlie's half dead, Roo wants to off us both, and you're choosing *now* to have a domestic?"

"A *domestic*?" Alastor seethed. "This isn't a domestic, Vox! This is me being *pissed off* at you for making me watch you *kill yourself* in my arms as I cradled you and begged you to stop and pleaded for you to *hear* me, and there was nothing I could do about it!"

Vox's anger subsided a fraction. "Al, I'm-"

"If you say you're sorry one more time, I'm going to rip out your damn tongue," spat Alastor.

Vox fell quiet.

"Three days," Alastor whispered. "I stayed with you for three days - whatever that means here, cradling you, wrapped around you, listening to you reboot, running scans and trying to figure out how to fix you without any tools. I couldn't summon my shadows, didn't have so much as a screwdriver, and I broke my fucking antler just to give me something to attempt to open the panel on the back of your screen. And *nothing* worked. I considered trying to reach your processor, but that would mean slicing you open with my antler or a claw and-" Alastor glanced away, distraught. "I couldn't bring myself to do it."

Vox stared at his lover, chest aching for a different reason now. He hadn't considered how distressed Alastor must have been without any of the usual tools or magic to help him fix Vox.

Suddenly, Alastor glowered at Vox and shoved at his chest. "But I would have done, had I known what you would attempt!"

Vox caught Alastor's hand. "I shouldn't have put you through that."

Alastor withdrew his hand from Vox's hold and Vox frowned, fingers flexing before his arm fell limply to his side.

"No, you shouldn't. But the past can't be changed," muttered Alastor. "Let's just get this trial over with."

"Hold on," Vox protested. "Al, let's talk about this for a minute."

"I'm *tired* of talking," Alastor said as he rounded on Vox. "I'm *exhausted*. I want to get out of here and go *home*. We can talk when we get back."

Vox fell silent. Alastor *did* look exhausted. They both did. They *should* after over a year of facing these trials.

Still, Vox didn't like this strange tension between them. He eyed Alastor's hand for a moment, fingers twitching with the need to *touch*. Alastor turned away and continued his journey through the darkness and Vox trotted after him, joining his side.

He carefully brushed his fingers along Alastor's palm. They didn't need to talk if Alastor was too tired to. They were experts at comforting one another in ways that didn't use words.

He pulsed a burst of affectionate static through Alastor's palm.

Alastor didn't respond.

Frowning, Vox laced their fingers together.

Alastor slid his fingers out of Vox's and clasped his hands behind his back, ears flat as he refused to look at Vox.

Vox swallowed, feeling rather hollow. Had he really screwed up that much that Alastor couldn't even *touch* him?

He opened his mouth then realised he couldn't find any words to say, so he lowered his head, ashamed, and followed Alastor's lead wordlessly.

"Charlie," Alastor whispered, coming to a dead halt.

Vox looked up and his breath hitched at the sight of the princess, battered and bruised and crumpled over whatever counted as floor in Purgatory like an unwanted doll. Alastor sprinted towards her, Vox close behind.

"Charlie," Alastor said again, louder, as he placed a hand on her shoulder. When she didn't respond, he brushed the hair from her bloodied face and Vox hovered above him, glancing around warily. Where was Roo? Why would she leave Charlie out in the open like this for them to find? What sort of trap was she creating for them?

"Charlie, wake up," Alastor said firmly, placing a gentle hand over her torn cheek. He squeezed his eyes shut, tried to summon healing magic that wouldn't come to him, then made a sound of frustration.

He glanced over at Vox. "Any ideas?"

Vox peered at her. Her breathing was laboured and she was trembling finely. She looked to be in some sort of coma, or perhaps she was too drained of energy to respond.

Still...

“Are you sure that’s her?” Vox asked, looking around nervously. “Why would Roo put her here for us to find?”

Alastor frowned and glanced back at Charlie, assessing her more carefully. He raked his gaze over the full length of her beaten body, over her matted hair and ripped clothes and her broken fingers and he gritted his teeth, ears lowering. “This is her.”

Vox swallowed, unease settling in his stomach. “But why-”

“I don’t know, Vox,” growled Alastor in irritation and Vox clamped his mouth shut, shrinking away from Alastor slightly in the face of his anger.

“Either way,” said Alastor lowly, “this is our chance to help her. Let’s find that back door.”

Vox stared at his lover for a moment, feeling lost. He had really upset Alastor.

“Al, I never meant to-”

Alastor scowled at him and Vox once again fell silent, hands itching to touch, to reassure and be reassured, but Alastor turned away again and plucked Charlie up into a bridal hold, and Vox’s hands fell uselessly to his sides.

“Forget about it,” Alastor said in a way that suggested he *wouldn’t* be forgetting about it. “Focus on finding a way out of here.”

Vox’s gaze dropped to his wrist and the word carved into it. “Don’t we have to beat the trials first?”

Alastor whirled around to face him, holding Charlie close. “We’ve got what we came here for. Help me find a way out.”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to-”

“For fuck’s sake, Vox! Stop giving me problems for one damn second and *help* me find the door!”

Vox felt himself tense. He felt himself brace for impact, for a smack or a punch or a kick like he had with his parents, like he had with Valentino when they fought.

When nothing happened, Vox cracked an eye open and found Alastor frowning at him silently. Vox dared to relax and Alastor’s permanent smile grew thin-lipped before he turned away without so much as a word to Vox.

Vox scuttled after him. “I’m s-” He cut himself off and shook his head. “What about Val?” he asked instead.

Alastor shot him a sharp look. “Focus on finding the door first. Then we can return for him.” He returned his attention ahead of them. “If he’s still alive.”

Vox winced. Was that another dig at Vox or merely a musing? Alastor’s voice hadn’t softened any despite Vox’s earlier reaction. He thrust his hands into his pockets and cast his gaze around the darkness, searching for the door.

“Perhaps it would be best to split up,” Alastor said after a while and Vox looked at him in surprise and with something that felt a lot like hurt flowering in his chest.

“What? Why?” he asked.

“To cover more ground,” Alastor said in exasperation. “In case you haven’t noticed, Purgatory is rather *extensive*. ”

“...What if we lose each other?” Vox asked, suddenly feeling that currently, Alastor wouldn’t be too averse to the idea.

“Static,” Alastor said. “Frequencies. We can find each other that way.”

Vox licked his lips and inched closer to his lover. “Al, I really don’t like the idea of us separating.”

“Oh? You were quick to try it earlier,” Alastor drawled. “At least what I’m suggesting isn’t *permanent*.”

Vox flinched, letting his hurt show. “Can we *please* talk about this?”

Alastor’s ears lowered, distress clear on his face. “After we find the door,” he growled. “After we get Charlie out of here. After we get *home*.”

Vox wrapped his arms around himself, seeking comfort. “I want to talk about it *now*,” he said firmly. “We can’t complete this trial if we’re fighting.”

“We might not have to complete this trial at all!” Alastor snapped. “Keep a lid on your emotions for a couple of hours - enough time so we can find the door and get out of here - and then feel free to break the damn bottle!”

Vox scowled, gripping his arms tighter. “Why are you being so *hostile* with-” He cut himself off and looked at Alastor with wide eyes. “...You’re part of the trial.”

Alastor blinked. “What?”

Vox pointed a finger at him. “*You* aren’t Alastor. You’re part of this trial. You’re chipping away at my confidence, telling me you don’t trust me, refusing to touch me, using our past against me, making me feel like *shit* so I think it’s happening all over again, that I’m *losing*

you. Because that's what despair would look like for me. Losing you over one mistake after *everything* we've overcome." He retreated a step and scoffed. "That's why finding Charlie was so easy. That isn't her. This is all part of the damn trial!"

"Vox-"

"No. No, I'm done listening to you. You aren't him. You aren't *my* Alastor. My Alastor would never treat me like this. He would never *punish* me like this."

"I'm not-"

"Shut up," Vox snapped. "Where is he? Where's Alastor? How do I find him?"

"I *am* your Alastor!" Alastor hissed. "And I'm not punishing you, Vox! I'm angry and upset! You want to talk about it, let's fucking talk about it!" He held Charlie tighter and his breaths shook as he glared at Vox. "I feel *betrayed*. I feel like I can't trust you. I feel like I've got to keep an eye on you every second after what you pulled, but I can't do that because I've also got to think about saving Charlie too! I am *exhausted*. Have you forgotten that I was fucking *raped* again? And then to be thrown straight into watching you almost kill yourself... Vox, I can't take much more of this. I want to go home. I'm *breaking*."

Vox stared at Alastor and felt sick. He watched his lover tremble with distress, watched his ears pin to his skull, watched his breaths shake and his gaze shine with unshed tears as he cradled Charlie close to his chest, clearly seeking comfort from her warmth, and Vox realised he'd made a terrible error. This *was* Alastor.

He swallowed thickly and reached out to pet an ear, but froze when Alastor flinched away from him.

"Please don't," Alastor whispered. "I can't... I don't want..." He couldn't look at Vox and Vox recoiled his hand, feeling far too hot as bile crept up his throat.

“Al,” he croaked.

Alastor closed his eyes tiredly. “I’ll get there,” he murmured. “But not... not yet.”

He tightened his grip on Charlie as he said the words and that somehow made everything *worse*.

“I’ll... I’ll look for the door,” Vox said hollowly as he turned and walked away from Alastor.

“I’m sorry, Vox,” Alastor murmured, but he didn’t follow Vox, didn’t even turn to watch him leave.

Vox’s heart cracked and his vision grew a little blurry, but he pushed forwards.

According to his chronometer, he shuffled through the endless darkness for *seven hours*. As he walked, his mood grew lower and the silence became suffocating and he found tears dripping slowly off the bottom of his screen.

Alastor would come around eventually, right? Vox hadn’t broken them that badly, surely? Their past couldn’t repeat itself. Not after all the good they had achieved together. It was one little mistake. Vox had been desperate. Terrified. He had thought it was the only way to give Alastor a chance to escape.

But, damn it, he hadn’t realised how *low* Alastor had been feeling. He had seemed... fine. Hopeful, even. Vox had asked him how he was after his trial and Alastor had seemed so *optimistic*.

Shit. He was such an idiot. Alastor had just been *raped* - how could he possibly have been *fine*? Vox clenched his fists angrily at himself. His lover had been putting on a brave face, smiling like he always did. And Vox had fallen for it and then he had tried to-

It didn't bear thinking about. How could he have put Alastor through all of that and then *blame* him for being angry? For being distressed?

And the cherry on top? Accusing Alastor of being part of the trial! Of not being real, of being an illusion for showing *emotion*. Alastor was right; he was such an asshole.

They needed to get home and talk in a safe place.

“Vox!”

Vox froze. Why did that sound like...?

He whirled around and found his worst fears confirmed. “Velvette?”

Velvette shook her head. “An illusion. You must listen. We have found a gap in The Root's magic. A ‘loophole’ of sorts. But you must hurry if you want to save your friend.”

Vox blinked. “You're... Purgatory?”

“Yes,” Velvette said impatiently. “The Root is distracted. She has lost her hostage. We take it you have her?”

Vox's eyes widened. “Charlie? Yeah, Alastor has her.”

Velvette peered past him. “He isn't with you?”

Vox swallowed and grimaced. “Ah... no. We... We decided to split up, to cover more ground. We're looking for the back door.”

Velvette smiled excitedly. “Very good! You may not have to complete this trial after all! But you must hurry!”

Vox straightened in confusion. “Wait, really?”

Velvette nodded and grasped both of his hands. “With The Root distracted in searching for Charlotte, you may be able to rescue your friend *and* get out of here. We’ll even take you to the door.”

Vox brightened. “Seriously? That’s... That’s great! Thank you! I’ll let Al know-”

“No!” Velvette said quickly, tightening her grip on him. “Not yet! If he has Charlotte, we must keep him wandering through the darkness a little longer. He will keep The Root distracted while you rescue your moth friend.”

“Val,” Vox whispered before he frowned worriedly. “Wait, won’t that be dangerous to Al? Facing Roo on his own? I... I can’t leave him like that. I promised we would stick together.” He wouldn’t break another promise.

Velvette shook her head with a small smile. “We will initiate his trial and The Root will be unable to harm him. She may taunt him, but she won’t be able to *hurt* him, nor kill him. He will be safe in the trial.”

“If he can withstand it,” Vox said uneasily. “He’s already at breaking point.”

“Your lover is stronger than you give him credit for,” Velvette said gently. “Besides, you won’t be long. Your moth friend is desperate to see you. He’s been waiting for you for a long time. We will show you to the door once you help him beat his trial and then you may contact your lover. Go, now.”

Velvette swept her arm behind her and Vox spotted a dim light in the distance.

A thought niggled at him. “Wait, Alastor will be stuck in his trial when I contact him.”

“We will pause the trial so that you may escape. So long as The Root remains trapped, we can help you.”

Vox huffed a relieved laugh. “Thank you!” he said enthusiastically before heading towards the light, but after a few steps, he stopped and frowned. “Wait, if you can pause Alastor’s trial, can’t you pause Valentino’s-” He cut himself off abruptly when he turned and found that Velvette had vanished.

He shook his head and raced towards the light.

He stumbled to a halt at a pink door with dim orange light shining beneath it. He carefully stepped into the room and found himself on one of Valentino’s empty sets, the moth-demon himself hunched over a pink-quilted bed, sobbing wretchedly beside-

Beside a very dead Angel Dust.

There was blood smeared over the sheets and a bullet hole between Angel’s eyes. The spider-sinner was dressed in something lacey and pretty, but as Vox glanced around, he realised that there were no cameras, just Valentino and Angel, alone.

Valentino cried harder and Vox noticed the gun by his elbow.

“Val?” Vox tried and Valentino stiffened and snapped his tearful gaze to Vox before his lip wobbled and he broke down again.

“Look at what I’ve done,” he wailed. “He... He gave me a second chance. Said he wanted us to try again and... and it all happened so fast! I couldn’t stop it! Words that I didn’t mean. I

was so aggressive and there was *nothing* I could do! I wasn't in control! I started smacking him around and he looked so damn scared and I *tried* to stop, I really did! But it was like I was a *puppet* and he begged me to stop hurting him, but I grabbed my gun and-"

He looked at Angel once more and his shoulders shook with his sobs.

"They were *my words*. Words I've said in the past - not just to him, but to you and my other employees. Horrible words. Terrible words. Disgusting words." He dug his claws into his own scalp, drawing blood and Vox approached him slowly.

He wrapped his arms around Valentino from behind, draping himself over his back. "It isn't real, Val. Angel's alive."

"That isn't the *point*," wailed Valentino. "The things I've said and done to him, to *you* and my employees... Vox, I deserve to be where he is right now."

Vox squeezed Valentino gently. "Not if you're remorseful. Not if you truly feel sorry for what you've done. The whole point of this place is to make you *reflect* on yourself, Val. This Angel isn't real, but there is one in Hell who's waiting for an apology from you. I need you to pick yourself up and take responsibility for what you've done in the past, and I need you to *want* to change."

Valentino flinched. "How could I ever apologise for everything I've done to him? He'll *never* forgive me."

"He doesn't need to. Saying sorry doesn't mean you're entitled to forgiveness, Val," said Vox softly. "What's important is that *you* mean what you say."

Valentino swallowed and stared at Angel for a long moment before he blinked and snapped his gaze to Vox with wide eyes. "Vox?!"

"In the flesh," grinned Vox and Valentino squeaked as his antennae vibrated.

“Is it... Is it really you? Not just an illusion, or one of Roo’s tricks, or-”

“It’s really me,” Vox said with a smile as he pulled Valentino to his feet, noticing the word *Fury* carved into his arm. “Val, we have a plan, but I need you to beat this trial.”

“...You actually came back for me,” Valentino said, eyes glassy.

Vox cupped his cheek, smile warm. “Of course I did. Told you I care about you.”

Valentino’s antennae vibrated faster. He looked around the room curiously. “Where’s Alastor?”

“Part of the plan,” said Vox excitedly as he grasped Valentino’s arms. “Listen, Purgatory has found a loophole. Alastor doesn’t know yet because he has Charlie and we need him to distract Roo a little longer while I bust you out of here. We’re going home, Val.”

Valentino blinked then grimaced as he cast his gaze back to Angel. Vox caught his chin, forcing him to look at him.

“That Angel isn’t real,” he repeated firmly. “But the one back home is and he *deserves* an apology from you. Promise me you’ll give him one?”

“I’ve done such terrible things to him,” Valentino whispered.

“And you’ve got the rest of eternity to make up for it,” Vox said. “But you *have* to let go of this Angel. If you want your second chance, Val, you have to work for it. You have to accept that you’ve done shitty things and make an effort to change. You have to help me break you out of here.”

Valentino swallowed and glanced at Angel one last time before straightening and summoning a familiar contract. He tore it in two, straight through the word ‘Anthony’.

As Angel dissolved and the set door creaked open, revealing an inky void, Vox grinned and dragged Valentino through it.

“I’m so proud of you,” he said and Valentino smiled softly.

“Congratulations.”

Valentino’s eyes bulged from his sockets. “*Velvette?*”

“Not quite,” said Velvette as she gestured for them to follow. She looked up almost nervously then raced off, forcing Vox and Valentino to chase after her.

“Purgatory,” panted Vox, keeping a tight grip on Valentino’s arm as the adrenaline kicked in, rolling through his veins along with anxiety and exhilaration. They were getting out! They were finally getting out!

Valentino blinked and they both watched as Velvette threw a hand in front of her, revealing an impressive oak door in the far distance, engraved with glowing golden sigils that looked rather angelic in nature. There was a black iron handle that clicked and turned and the door began to ease open.

“Contact your lover!” Velvette shouted.

Vox sent an urgent burst of static into the air and produced a low, thrumming frequency, which he amplified using his speakers. He began to pulse the frequency in a frantic rhythm, oscillating faster then slower again to alter its pitch, anything to draw Alastor’s attention.

He received nothing in return at first, but then he saw the flash of a red coat not too far away and his chest tightened with excitement and relief as Alastor galloped towards them, Charlie clutched to his chest as he looked at Vox in confusion. Alastor's gaze flitted to the door and his eyes widened and he pushed himself faster.

“No!” screamed a terrible voice and Purgatory began to shake and echo and Velvette winced before crumpling to her knees.

Vox slowed, looking back at her worriedly. A frequency harmonised with his, concerned and curious and reassuring. Vox glanced at Alastor's retreating form, confused to find Alastor wasn't looking at him.

“Go!” Velvette shouted desperately, snapping him out of his thoughts. “I'll hold her back!”

Behind her, the corpses of Purgatory faded into existence and despite their lifeless gazes and grey skin, they could *run*.

Valentino grasped his hand and Vox jerked into action, sprinting towards the door as Velvette was swarmed by the sea of corpses.

Roots flew out of the ground, trying to wind around their ankles and waists and Alastor stumbled over one of them, but Vox caught him and dragged him towards the door.

They tumbled through and the door slammed shut behind them as Roo screamed.

For a moment, no one spoke as they caught their breaths, then Vox looked around the familiar remains of the incinerated book shop.

“Fuck,” he said emphatically before pulling Alastor's back to his chest, winding his arms around his middle, and kissing his neck, being careful not to jostle Charlie.

Alastor's ears dropped and he stiffened in Vox's arms.

Vox drew back quickly, chest aching. "Sorry," he mumbled and Alastor ducked his head, unable to meet Vox's gaze.

Vox gasped when Valentino dragged him into a frantic hug.

"Thank you," Valentino breathed, squeezing Vox tightly, and Vox smiled and petted his ruff.

He glanced at his arm as Valentino hugged him, noticing that the carved word was already beginning to heal into a pale scar.

He blew out a sigh of relief and hugged Valentino back.

Everything was going to be fine.

They were all going to be fine.

Once Valentino released him, he turned to Alastor with a smile, which fell when he noticed the Radio Demon was already halfway down the street, ears low and Charlie clutched against him like a comfort toy.

Vox's heart sank.

Chapter End Notes

Those of you with keen eyes might notice something odd about this chapter compared to the other trial chapters - specifically the title...

Chapter 63: A Gaping Pit Of Despair

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The hotel staff were shocked to see them alive.

Valentino did not join them, instead fleeing to V-Tower to greet Velvette and likely apologise for their last meeting. It would take some time for him to scrape together the courage to talk to Angel, but Vox knew he would, eventually.

Lucifer and Vaggie whisked Charlie away the moment Alastor stepped through the door with her, and Vox lingered behind, watching the remaining hotel staff greet Alastor with warmth and relief.

Vox stood by the door and felt... out of place.

Alastor's ears were upright again, his usual smile shining as he interacted with the hotel staff, but when he caught Vox's gaze, his smile dipped and his ears twitched and he turned away again, looking subdued. He excused himself rather quickly, claiming exhaustion, and he stepped into the shadows and vanished.

Vox put a hand to his chest, surprised at the sharp pain there. The hotel staff greeted Vox with a little more professionalism, but with no less warmth in their smiles and Vox joined them for a drink at the bar, managing a few tales of their romp through Purgatory before Husk's keen eye caught on to something not being quite right and he changed the subject, leaving Vox to steal glances at the stairs, hoping for a glimpse of a red coat.

When the clock struck midnight, Vox downed his glass of rye and bid the others a good night. He climbed the stairs unsteadily, trying to recall how much he'd had to drink and losing count after four measures of brandy and five glasses of rye. He gripped the banister and stumbled up each floor until reaching a familiar corridor.

He staggered to Alastor's door and steadied himself against the wall, pressing his screen against it as he gritted his teeth in frustration at himself. This was not how he wanted Alastor to see him.

But *he* wanted to see Alastor.

He took a breath and knocked three times.

Alastor opened the door a few moments later, in his nightwear - and how soft and approachable he looked dressed like that - but a frown touched his features when his gaze met Vox's, and he blocked the door frame with his body.

"You're drunk," he said, ears dropping.

"I just want to talk," Vox slurred, propping himself up against the wall. "Please, Al."

"When you're sober," Alastor said, wrinkling his nose a little. He tried to shut the door but Vox wedged his foot between it and the frame.

"I want to talk *now*," Vox said angrily. "You promised. You promised when we got back, we'd talk."

"And I've been waiting here all night," snapped Alastor. "I am not the one who decided to go to the *bar* instead of discussing whatever has *broken* here." He gestured between them.

Vox's stomach sank. "*Broken?*" he echoed softly.

Alastor's eyes widened a fraction before he averted his gaze. "Go to bed, Vox. Get some sleep. We'll talk tomorrow."

He tried to close the door again, but Vox lurched forwards and winced as the door jarred his arm. Alastor stepped back with a scowl.

“Your own bed, Vox. You aren’t sleeping here tonight.”

Vox’s antennae sparked and his body crackled with excess charge from the alcohol. His processor was sluggish and his vision dimmed a little with the slow processing speeds.

“I want to talk about what happened. I... I want to fix whatever I broke,” he managed.

“Not like this,” Alastor said with a scowl. “I want you to be of sound mind for a conversation like that.”

“Won’t be able to sleep,” Vox mumbled, tipping forwards and catching himself on the door. “Want to be with you.”

Alastor clenched his teeth. “Get out, Vox.”

Vox flinched and shook his head. “Al, I *need* you. Just need to be with you.”

For a long, terrible moment, Alastor didn’t respond, and Vox thought he was about to be kicked out. Then, Alastor stepped aside with a sigh and gestured to the bed. Vox’s head dropped in relief and he stumbled into the room, smiling gratefully when Alastor deposited a pair of pyjamas in his lap - Vox’s pyjamas, since they kept clothes in each other’s room these days.

Vox honestly would have preferred a pair of Alastor’s pyjamas merely for the comforting scent, even if the chest was a bit tight. Still, these would do.

He undressed quickly and crawled under the covers, nearly sobbing with relief when Alastor flicked the lights off and delicately slid in beside him.

He cuddled up to Alastor, wrapping his arms around his lover.

“No,” Alastor growled.

Vox froze. “I just thought-”

Alastor suddenly vanished from his grip, melting into the shadows and appearing at the foot of the bed with his fists clenched and his back to Vox as the light flipped on once more.

Silence fell between them as nervous heat prickled Vox’s neck.

“You found the door and went back for Valentino before me,” Alastor whispered.

Alarm bells rang in Vox’s mind. “No,” he said, trying to remember. “No, Velvette said- Not Velvette. *Purgatory*. Purgatory dressed as Velvette. She said there was a door. No, she said there was a *loophole* and that I could use it to find Val. Wait, no, that’s not right.” Vox scowled and rubbed his hands down his screen, not because it helped, but because that’s what people did when they were drunk. “Velvette said to find Valentino and leave you because we needed to reach the door and you were a distraction for Roo.” Vox squinted. “Wait-”

“Get out, Vox.”

Vox looked up at Alastor and found his lover glowering at him with what looked like *hurt* behind his gaze.

“I’m not explaining it right,” Vox said, scowling.

“You’re explaining it perfectly,” Alastor snarled. “You used me as *bait* so that you could rescue Valentino and escape, and you just *hoped* I’d find you in time before the door shut.”

Vox shook his head as bile crept up his throat. “No! No, that’s not true. Purgatory *told* me to *not* tell you because we needed a distraction.”

Wait, that did sound a lot like using Alastor as bait.

“I faced the despair trial *alone*, you piece of shit! Do you have *any* idea what I went through while you were off looking for Valentino?” Alastor roared. “So much for supporting one another!”

Vox squeezed his eyes shut, face glitching in distress as he tried to remember clearly what had happened. “That was... No, that was the plan. You were *supposed* to face the trial while I rescued Val, because that was how you’d stay safe, out of Roo’s claws. And then Purgatory would pause the trial to let you escape with us.”

“Oh, so that’s fine then?” Alastor hissed. “Keep me in the dark, throw me into the despair trial *alone* when I *told* you that I was at my breaking point, and then hurl me out of it whenever it suits *you*? I was carrying Charlie, you asshole! I had to protect her from the monsters I faced, while also dealing with Roo’s taunts and her attempts to fucking *maul* me! And you... you *abandoned* me.”

Vox felt sick and charge skittered over his frame unevenly. “Velvette- *Purgatory* said Roo couldn’t touch you while you were facing the trial...”

“*They fucking lied!*” Alastor snarled and there were tears rolling down his cheeks as he fisted the sheets. “You left me, Vox! You left me to face all of it alone! Why would you do that?”

Vox’s eyes widened, breaths coming faster and faster as he watched Alastor *break*. “You- You told me to leave. You told me to find the door.”

“I was upset!” Alastor shouted, tears falling quicker. “I didn’t think it would take *seven hours* for you to come back to me! And you didn’t come back to me, did you? You went to *Valentino!*”

Vox's heart raced and he couldn't *breathe*. "Alastor I-"

"Don't you fucking dare say you're sorry!" Alastor snarled, antlers rising a few inches.

Vox reacted on instinct. He lurched forwards and grabbed Alastor's arm, aiming to pull him against his chest to hold him and soothe him, but Alastor tensed, eyes blowing wide with fear, and Vox realised his mistake too late as Alastor *reacted*.

His antlers crashed through Vox's screen and he scrambled out of Vox's grip, falling off the bed in his haste. He pinned himself against the wall, chest heaving, dials swinging, and sweat collecting at his neck as he stared at Vox's smashed face.

What had Alastor seen in the despair trial?

Vox watched Alastor through what little remained of his screen and it was all too much as he promptly vomited over the edge of the bed.

"Vox, I... I didn't mean to," Alastor said in horror as Vox wiped the shattered remains of his screen with his sleeve, uncaring of the gashes it gouged into his arm.

"I think I should go," Vox croaked as he swung out of bed and nearly fell into his own puddle of vomit.

"Vox, I-" Alastor hesitated as Vox neared the door, and Vox paused, waiting, desperate for Alastor to call him back, for them to make up and for things to go back to the way they were *supposed* to be.

Alastor swallowed. "...If that's what you want," he murmured, looking away.

It wasn't what Vox wanted. It was the exact opposite of what Vox wanted.

But he'd caused quite enough damage today.

He shut the door quietly behind him.

Vox awoke to a frequency oscillating so fast and so high-pitched that he clutched his chest in agony at whatever torment the creature at the other end was facing.

He'd recognise Alastor's frequency *anywhere*.

He zipped into the lights, soared through the power cables and landed in a heap in Alastor's room.

Alastor surged upright, pulling the bed sheets up to his neck as he bared his teeth.

"Vox?" he asked in confusion, hair a mess and gaze still foggy with sleep.

Vox looked around in alarm, trying to locate the threat.

"What are you doing here, Vox?" Alastor asked irritably before he grimaced at the state of Vox's half-smashed screen.

"You... You called out to me... in distress," Vox said slowly.

Alastor looked about the room. "Well, I'm clearly not in any danger."

“...Your frequency,” Vox protested. “Alastor, you were in *anguish*.”

Alastor frowned and looked down for a moment. “I had a nightmare,” he admitted after a few moments.

Vox scowled. “A *nightmare*? That must have been some nightmare. Your frequency wasn’t *that* bad even when I tried to-” He cut himself off and looked away when Alastor sent him a sharp gaze.

“Well, now you know what the nightmare was about,” growled Alastor.

Vox flinched and rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry for waking you.” He glanced at the light and readied himself for travel.

“Sit,” sighed Alastor. “Allow me to fix that screen.”

Vox sat at the edge of the bed obediently and a soft whine escaped him when Alastor gently touched the edges of his screen. He leaned desperately into his lover’s touch.

Alastor murmured a chant beneath his breath and yellow sigils flashed around them as Vox’s screen pieced itself back together.

Once he was fixed, Vox leaned his screen against Alastor’s forehead and this time, Alastor allowed it.

“I missed you,” Vox whispered. He felt achy and sluggish from all the alcohol yesterday, but he could manage.

Alastor said nothing, brows furrowed and a pained expression on his features.

“Talk to me, Al,” Vox murmured. “Tell me what you’re thinking.” He reached up to card his fingers through Alastor’s hair, but Alastor caught his wrist before he could make contact.

“You *left* me, Vox,” Alastor whispered. “You left me to face that trial alone.”

“I was trying to save us,” Vox said quietly. “Purgatory had a plan.”

Alastor was quiet for a long moment. “...You promised that you would protect me. You promised that I was *safe*, that you wouldn’t let anything hurt me.” Alastor met his eyes, gaze shining with *betrayal*. “You let that trial *break* me. You let Roo tear into me. And you left me to defend Charlie by myself.”

Vox’s breath hitched. “I didn’t know Roo could get to you.”

“Maybe not, but you knew I was at my limit, yet you let me walk into that trial alone. You used me as *bait*.” Alastor pulled away from Vox, averting his gaze. “How can I trust you after that? First you give up on me, then you throw me to the wolves... What happened to you, Vox? Something has changed and I feel as though I’m looking at a *stranger*.”

Vox swallowed thickly. “Nothing has changed,” he whispered desperately. “Al, *nothing* has changed. I’m still the same old picturebox. I still love you.”

Alastor’s eyes grew glassy. “How can you say that? You *abandoned* me, Vox. Betrayed my trust, my faith in you. The things I witnessed in that trial, the things I was *forced* to do, to suffer through...” He looked haunted. “I’ll carry those things with me for the rest of my afterlife.” He gazed at Vox, hurt. “And you weren’t even there.”

Vox’s chest felt too tight. He could barely breathe as he looked at the *despair* in Alastor’s gaze.

“Tell me how to fix it,” Vox breathed. “Tell me how to make things right.”

“I don’t know if you can,” Alastor mumbled.

Vox’s heart felt as though it was crumbling. He clutched at it, panic and anxiety and memories of a vicious past crashing over him in waves. No, no, *no!* They couldn’t go back to this! They couldn’t be repeating those same mistakes.

Fuck! It was all Vox’s fault. He had left Alastor. Had abandoned him when he needed Vox the most. Had betrayed him. Left him to suffer.

They had been doomed from the start, hadn’t they? They had rescued Charlie and Valentino, but it had *broken* them in the process, just as Purgatory had warned them that it would.

It was happening all over again. Alastor was pulling away, or maybe Vox had pushed him, and they would turn their backs on a life they had *both* wanted and their relationship, their *friendship* would sour and twist and rot until they returned to a miserable life of hating one another and fighting one another and trying to pretend that they weren’t *broken* and-

Vox fell to his knees in front of Alastor, trembling. “Please,” he begged. “Please, I’m sorry! Alastor, don’t leave me! I can’t do this again! I can’t go through this again!”

Alastor’s ears flattened. “*You* left me first!” he said angrily even as a tear dripped down his cheek. He closed his eyes and shook his head, making a sound of frustration. “I’m not... I just need *time*, Vox. Time to think. To recover. To *heal*.” He frowned down at Vox, swallowing thickly. “Can you give me that?”

“Yes,” Vox whispered. “What do you need me to do? How can I help?”

“I need...” Alastor squared his jaw, looking upset as he averted his gaze. “I need us to spend some time apart for a little while. I think... I think those trials have made us a little too co-

dependent. I think we need to regain some sense of what we are, apart. Of who we are as individuals.”

Vox’s mouth went dry and his stomach rolled dangerously. He didn’t want to be apart from Alastor. Still, if that was what Alastor wanted...

He nodded and climbed to his feet, fingers digging into his own thigh when Alastor wouldn’t meet his gaze. He glanced at the light once more before his breaths shook.

“We’re... going to be okay, aren’t we, sweetheart?”

Alastor flinched at the endearment. “...I don’t know, Vox.”

Vox’s eyes widened before he raced into the light and back to V-Tower.

He staggered to his enormous window and dropped to his knees as he lost control of his breathing, heaving out wrecked sobs in between gasps for air as he clutched at his chest.

Valentino came running minutes later, Velvette following tiredly, and as the moth-demon wrapped himself around Vox, hushing him, trying to soothe him, treating him so gently, Vox couldn’t help but think one thought.

And so the cycle repeats.

It didn’t take long for Charlie to show signs of improvement and Valentino did, eventually, apologise to Angel, even if the newly-freed Angel Dust didn’t forgive him.

Alastor and Vox had yet to speak to one another.

Vox wanted nothing more than to fall at his beloved's feet and beg for his forgiveness, but he knew better than anyone that forgiveness took time and patience, and Alastor had requested they part ways for a little while to work on themselves, so Vox sulked and wallowed in self pity and buried himself in work, just as he always did when he needed a distraction.

He didn't, however, scope out the local bars for hookups and he was grateful when Valentino didn't approach him with any 'fun ideas'. Valentino really was trying to better himself and Vox couldn't bear the thought of offering himself to anyone else because it would feel too much like cheating on Alastor - even if they were on a break.

So, instead, Vox drowned himself in reports and statistics and programming schedules, and pretended that he wasn't crying himself to sleep at night.

"You need to get out of here," Velvette said, startling Vox from his latest report. "Staring at screens all day isn't helping you. Put yourself out there. Go have some fun. Find a bar and a pretty lady or a buff guy and *relax* for a couple of hours."

Vox scowled, staring hard at his report. "I'm not cheating on Al."

Velvette pursed her lips and Valentino slid behind her, gaze soft. "Voxy, it's been *six weeks*. He... He isn't coming back."

Vox blinked and looked up at Val in surprise. "Six weeks? What are you talking about? It's been like...four days."

"It's *November*," Velvette said with a frown and Vox pulled a face and checked the date at the top of his report and-

-And it read *November*.

Vox straightened and checked his internal chronometer and found that it, too, read *November*. He swallowed. "...No. No, it's been a week *tops*. It couldn't have been- I wouldn't have let things go on for this long..."

Valentino's antennae dipped. "Vox, sometimes you work for days on end, without eating, without sleeping... Vel and I have had to force you to do those things."

Vox shook his head slowly, heart racing. No. No, time couldn't have just... slipped through his fingers like that! He would have *noticed*. He wouldn't have *left* Alastor for so long...

Fuck. Why hadn't Alastor called him? Why hadn't Alastor tried to make contact? Why was he letting them *drift apart*?

His gaze darted to his monitors, to the drone- and camera-feeds that he had never switched off and as his breaths grew shallow, he caught sight of a distorted image and jumped into the lights.

He stumbled in front of Alastor and looked up at him with wide, desperate eyes, before his breath hitched at Alastor's torn frame and clenched teeth. His ears flattened at Vox's appearance and he cradled his arm awkwardly as he tried to hobble around Vox.

"What happened?" Vox breathed.

"One of *your* employees," growled Alastor angrily.

Angry. He was always angry these days. Angry at Vox.

"They did *this* to you?" Vox asked in surprise and Alastor smirked darkly.

"Well, you should see the other guy!" A laugh track played behind his words before cutting off abruptly and leaving a tense silence to stretch between them.

“Tell me who and I’ll make sure they’re punished for it,” demanded Vox and Alastor shot him a tired look.

“Why are you here, Vox? You’ve been gone for so long...”

Nausea rolled around Vox’s stomach. “To make things right between us,” Vox said desperately. “Have you... had enough time yet?”

Alastor raised his eyebrows, staring at Vox in shock before his expression hardened. “Have *I* had enough time? You’re the one ignoring my calls! You haven’t picked up once! Everything goes straight through to voicemail! I’ve left your assistants *dozens* of messages, hoping, *pleading* for you to call me back. But you... you’ve been unreachable for *seven weeks*.”

Vox swallowed, blood running cold. “...N-No. You didn’t try to-” He checked his messages and found dozens upon dozens of missed calls and voicemails from Alastor - even a couple of texts.

He was losing his mind. He staggered backwards, clutching his screen as his chest heaved and his face glitched and his knees threatened to buckle.

“I don’t understand,” he hissed hysterically. “What the fuck is wrong with me?”

Finally, *finally*, Alastor’s gaze softened. “...You faced a lot in Purgatory, Vox. Perhaps it has affected you in ways you didn’t expect.” Alastor lowered his gaze. “It has certainly affected me, in more ways than one.”

Vox’s heart ached and he caught Alastor’s hand, nearly sobbing in relief when Alastor let him hold it.

“Tell me what to do,” Vox whispered. “Tell me how to fix this. Alastor, I... I’m a *mess* without you.”

Alastor was silent for a long moment and dread began to pool in Vox’s stomach.

“I think, perhaps, that it is time to ‘give up’,” Alastor said softly as his grief-stricken gaze met Vox’s. “I don’t think we are the same people we once were.”

Vox could hear the sound of his own heart pounding in his chest, could hear his entire world collapsing around him, and a pit of anguish and despair gaped open in his stomach.

“Alastor, no,” he pleaded. “Don’t... Don’t do this.”

Alastor’s mouth twitched and it was clear he was hurting too. “Vox, something has *changed*. I don’t *feel*...” He cut himself off, looking haunted. “I don’t trust you anymore,” he whispered instead and Vox wasn’t expecting the knife through his heart.

He clutched at his chest, breaths coming harder and faster as his screen glitched and sparks danced over his frame, and the street lamps flashed around them.

“Alastor, *please*,” Vox begged, tears rolling down his screen. “Give me a second chance!”

“That *was* your second chance,” Alastor said frantically. “*Our* second chance! And it... it’s all gone wrong again. We keep getting it *wrong*, making the wrong decisions, and... and what are we supposed to do? Give one another a third chance? A fourth chance?” Alastor stared at him helplessly. “*Look* at what we’re doing to each other! Vox, we can’t keep this up!”

“I *love* you!” Vox said, grief making his voice crack. “I thought you loved me too?”

Alastor ran a hand through his dishevelled hair. “I do.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I *did*. I loved what you were. But you... you’ve changed. You’ve become someone I barely

recognise. You've become the demon I *hated* all those years ago." He looked at Vox with a glassy gaze. "I can't do this anymore. I can't keep waiting for you. I can't keep letting you use me and betray me and *give up* on me."

Vox couldn't breathe.

"I need this to end," Alastor whispered. "I *want* this to end," he said more firmly.

Vox made a sound of desperation and tightened his grip on Alastor's hand, pulsing wave after wave of anguished, needy, *devoted* static into Alastor.

Alastor pulled his hand out of Vox's grip with a scowl, unwilling to return any sort of responding static.

"We're done here," Alastor murmured as he stepped away from Vox. "I wish you the best of luck with whatever lies ahead of you, old pal."

Alastor stepped towards the shadows.

Vox's frequency clashed with Alastor's, filled with despair and anger and heartache and *love* as Vox fell to his knees in the middle of the street.

"Don't abandon me, Al," Vox begged.

He was taken off-guard when Alastor's frequency wrapped around his tightly like a warm blanket, bursting with joy and shock and excitement and *hope*.

Alastor glanced over his shoulder, a tear sliding down his cheek. "You abandoned me, Vox."

He disappeared into the shadows and it was emotional *whiplash* as Vox's heart threatened to shatter into a thousand pieces. He was drowning. Suffocating. And people were watching. How many people had been watching their fight? How had he not noticed that they had an audience?

Fuck, he couldn't breathe. He couldn't *breathe*. His temperature was rising and his face was glitching and he couldn't feel his fingers and he wanted to *scream* and *cry* and he was *furious* and he was *upset* and everything was wrong. How had it gone so horribly wrong? Why was he so selfish and cruel? Why had he let things break down between them? Why did he ruin every good thing in his life?

He was going to crash. There were so many errors now. He needed to get out of the street, away from the leering sinners and the demons taking pictures of his mental breakdown. He needed to lock himself away in his room *forever* so he couldn't destroy anyone else and he deserved to let himself rust and rot away and he deserved to *hurt* for what he had done to Alastor, for how he had made Alastor feel.

His temperature climbed higher and higher and he could feel his electronics pushing into overdrive, generating more errors and warnings and he welcomed the oncoming crash, welcomed the peace it would bring him, the absence of this terrible agony in his heart. He gritted his teeth and forced his systems past their breaking point.

And just before he crashed, he felt a panicked, soothing, *protective* frequency nestle into his, and Vox could almost convince himself that it was real.

Chapter End Notes

You may have noticed a few little *odd* things going on in this chapter... Let me know if you spotted them (they're not errors or typos) ;)

Chapter 64: Into The Abyss Of Despair

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Alastor stalked through the gates with flat ears and panic lingering in his chest.

He had almost lost Vox.

Worse than that, he hadn't been able to *reach* Vox until it was almost too late, until his lover had almost-

It didn't bear thinking about.

They needed to get out of Purgatory. They needed to get *home*, where they'd be safe and their minds could heal.

He was so *angry* at Vox, but he was more angry at himself, for allowing Vox to come to the conclusion that Alastor *wouldn't* save him. For allowing Vox to feel so much fear and isolation after Vox had fought so hard to protect and comfort Alastor during his fear trial. He should have tried harder, should have worked out that he could contact Vox through their shared frequencies sooner. Instead, he had let his lover suffer to the point where he'd felt the only option was to end his own life.

Alastor felt sick.

And now there was tension between them. Tension because Alastor was angry and frustrated and Vox was feeling low and subdued, and *damn it*, Vox nearly *died*. After everything they had faced together, after everything they had overcome, after all the years of fighting and

slowly helping each other heal, Vox nearly left Alastor because he thought it was the only way to *save* him from getting trapped in the trials.

Didn't he understand? Alastor wasn't leaving here without him. They would leave together or not at all. Alastor couldn't abandon Vox to this place, not after all the times Vox had been abandoned in his life and afterlife. Alastor wouldn't be another broken memory for him before he extinguished his own soul. No, Alastor would fight tooth and claw to drag them both out of this terrible void or he would die trying, just as he knew Vox would fight for him.

Oh, how Alastor *despised* this place. He was so very tired and frustrated and he wanted his picturebox to be *safe*, free of his own hopeless thoughts and spiralling emotions and fears.

What if he tried again in the next trial? What if Alastor couldn't reach him in time? Alastor stiffened as he licked his lips. He had to ensure that Vox wouldn't attempt to take his own life again. He had to ensure that Vox knew what it had been like to watch his lover overheat and melt and smoke whilst Alastor screamed and begged for him to stop, to hear him, to *feel* him. Alastor couldn't beat this without Vox. And now that he'd had a taste of a happy afterlife with his picturebox, he couldn't give it up. He couldn't go back to sleeping alone and longing for a dance partner and replaying memories of old conversations he'd never have again.

An afterlife without Vox sounded quiet and empty and devoid of colour.

He needed Vox to promise to keep fighting, no matter how hopeless he felt, because Alastor would *always* find a way to save him, just as Vox had walked into Alastor's afterlife and saved him.

He opened his mouth, ready to discuss what had happened in Vox's fear trial, only for him to freeze at the sight of a familiar blonde woman standing in front of them, looking solemn and not at all like she had suffered through a years' worth of torture at Roo's claws. He started towards her instinctively, then hesitated.

"This is your final opportunity," Charlie said and there was something *off* about her tone - an unusual echo behind her words. "We can give you peace. Happiness. Stop fighting and take our offer."

Alastor growled softly and retreated a step. This wasn't Charlie. "No."

"This path won't end well," said Charlie firmly. "The Root has been watching. She senses a weakness. She will use it."

"What weakness?" Vox asked quietly, submissively, and Alastor's heart clenched.

Charlie glanced at him darkly. "The next trial will leave you vulnerable. She will take advantage of that."

"She needs us to beat the trials to free her," Alastor pointed out.

"She needs *one* of you to beat the trials. After that, our programming will complete and we will cease to exist. You will be left fighting alone."

"We'll be left fighting together," Vox said and Alastor shot him a brief glance, chest warming with affection, before returning his gaze to Charlie.

Charlie scowled. "You underestimate her. She will have no use for you once the trials are complete." She glanced at Vox. "Especially you, since you no longer wear her chain."

Alastor bristled at the *threat* towards Vox. He wouldn't let Roo get her hands on Vox after they had just broken his chain.

Vox frowned. "Trust me, we aren't underestimating her. We've seen what she's capable of. But we need to rescue Charlie. It's what we came here for."

Charlie bared her teeth. "You've seen but a *fraction* of what she's capable of! She will ravage your world! Stop now! Your princess is almost dead and if you finish the trials, The Root will *destroy* her anyway!" She gestured between them. "Your bond is weakening. The trials are straining your relationship. Stop now before you *lose each other*."

Alastor glowered at Charlie before looking over at Vox in a combination of fierce determination and frustration. “Our bond isn’t weakening. He’s just an idiot and I’m angry.”

Vox shot him a miserable expression before hooking his little finger around Alastor’s. Alastor snatched his hand away, memories briefly returning to his time in the forest, before he frowned and lowered his hand once more, encouraging Vox to try again. The touch had caught him off-guard when he was already tense, but this was *Vox*, and he deserved to be able to touch Alastor whenever he liked. There was a soft sigh of relief from Vox and guilt pulled at Alastor’s heartstrings. His lover *needed* touch like it was oxygen.

“We *will* stop you,” Charlie promised lowly. “You can’t be allowed to free her.”

“You keep saying that,” Alastor said drily. “Yet you keep failing to meet your promises.”

Charlie turned to Vox and she seemed to stare directly into his soul. He shifted uncomfortably.

“We’re almost there,” she said before dissolving into the darkness and that sounded very much like a threat towards Vox, perhaps even a *promise* to hurt him, to drag his mood down further.

That wasn’t allowed to happen, thought Alastor as he looked at Vox. *No one* was allowed to make Vox feel the way he had during the last trial. No one was allowed to convince him that *suicide* was a valid option.

Vox glanced at him, frowning when Alastor narrowed his eyes in determination. He released Vox’s finger before marching into the darkness, certain his lover would follow.

“Alastor, I’m sorry,” Vox said as he trailed after his lover.

“You’ve said that already,” grumbled Alastor, anger at Purgatory and Roo sloshing around his stomach along with frustration at Vox and exhaustion from the trials.

“Yeah, well, I really mean it,” Vox sighed, and Alastor was barely listening, too busy trying to figure out what their last trial could entail and perhaps still a little distracted by his own shock at seeing Vox *attempt to end his own life*.

“Hm.”

Vox scowled and caught Alastor’s arm, whirling him around. “Just stop, would you? Sulking isn’t going to help us.”

“Sulking?” Alastor hissed, fur bristling as the anger and exhaustion and anxiety and tension unexpectedly boiled over. “I am not *sulking!*” He poked Vox roughly in the chest and briefly wondered if he had done that as an excuse to touch his lover. “I am merely *infuriated* by the fact that the man I trust with my *life* decided to give up on me.”

Vox’s shoulders slumped. “I wasn’t giving up on you. I was giving up on- Look, I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“And how can I trust that now?” Alastor snapped, distress and anguish crawling down his throat and toying with his heart. “How can I trust *you?*”

Vox stiffened as Alastor stared at him defiantly. “...Alastor-”

“You’ve said enough,” Alastor managed before turning on his heel and marching away again, unable to process the emotions fighting for dominance within him. Fear and upset and fury and *guilt* and-

Vox whirled him around once more. “That isn’t fair. After everything we’ve been through, I make *one* mistake and you throw that at me? ‘*How can I trust you?*’ I was scared, Alastor. I thought it was the only way to let you progress.”

“And how can I trust that you won’t do it again in this trial?” Alastor snapped, almost hysterically. “How can I trust that you won’t give up when things get difficult? Because when you give up, Vox, you’re *abandoning* me. You’re abandoning everything we’ve worked so hard for. I can’t go back to eating dinner alone and wishing I had someone to dance with and sleeping in an empty bed while I have nightmares of watching you *die* here, wondering if I had tried harder, if I had been smarter or faster, would I have been able to save you?” Alastor shook his head as his vision grew blurry. “Vox, I can’t lose you again - once in an afterlife is more than enough.”

Vox blinked, falling silent and Alastor squeezed his eyes shut. “You’re not allowed to give up on me now. You’re not allowed to stop fighting. Not when I’ve only just got you back. Not when we have so much to look forward to. We reach the end of this together or not at all.”

Vox’s expression softened. “Alastor...”

“Promise me,” Alastor demanded, grabbing Vox’s hands. “Promise me that you won’t *ever* stop fighting. That no matter what we see in this last trial, no matter what we hear and feel, that you’ll keep fighting because I *will* come and save you, Vox. I promise you that I’ll *never* abandon you. I’ll always find my way back to you.”

A smile slowly touched Vox’s lips. “I’m sorry,” he said sincerely. “For putting you through all that stress and fear. I thought I was saving you.”

“I know,” Alastor murmured as he closed his eyes and let his head fall against Vox’s with a soft *clunk*. “And I appreciate you trying to ensure my safety while you were trapped in your worst nightmare, but I need you to promise never to do something so recklessly stupid again. We are in this together. You *promised*, Vox. We both did.”

Vox’s arms tentatively slipped around Alastor’s waist. “I promise,” he said and Alastor let out a soft huff of relief before stealing a sweet kiss.

“I thought I lost you,” Alastor whispered, voice cracking a little. “I thought... I thought I was too late.”

Vox's hand slid into his hair, holding him close. "I'm here, Alastor. You saved me, just like you always do." He nuzzled Alastor's ear and Alastor melted against him. "I promise I won't pull a stunt like that ever again. We're in this together. We'll get out of here *together*."

Three days he'd stayed with Vox in the fear trial, listening to him reboot and running scans using the buttons at his hips, and when all that had failed, he had tried to pry Vox's back panel off to access some of his systems. He had slammed his own head into whatever Purgatory considered a floor to break his antler, so that he had some sort of tool to remove the back of Vox's screen. He had shifted into his true form so that he could slide his fingers into Vox's vents and tried to manipulate any circuitry he could reach. He'd tried summoning shadows that wouldn't respond to him, tried sending static skittering down his ports, and then when all that had failed at bringing Vox's systems back online, Alastor looked at his broken antler and decided that he had to get his hands dirty, no matter how much it would traumatise him.

So, with shaking fingers he tore his antler through Vox's stomach and wrapped a hand around his processor, but before he could get much further, the wound quickly started to heal and Alastor ripped his fingers from Vox's body in horror as the wound closed up.

He tried again, knowing that Vox wouldn't feel any pain in his current state, and it was *nauseating* tearing into his lover like that, but he *had* to get Vox working again, no matter the tax on his own mental state. Again, the wound healed faster than Alastor could act and Alastor quickly caught on.

He tried and tried to wake Vox, to rouse him from whatever nightmare Purgatory was forcing him through, and after three sleepless days, Alastor had watched Vox's vents close and smoke rise from them, and Alastor had never felt *fear* like he had in that moment.

Perhaps there had been three parts to his fear trial after all.

Still, Alastor wouldn't reveal to Vox what he had faced over those three days. Vox already felt guilty, was already feeling hopeless and depressed, he didn't need any more weight on his shoulders.

Alastor was *exhausted*.

He leaned against Vox heavily, letting the man take his weight, and Vox held him tighter, petting his hair and rubbing his back and kissing his head comfortingly.

“I love you,” Alastor murmured, because he felt that Vox needed to hear it.

“I love you too,” Vox whispered into his hair and something in Alastor’s chest eased a fraction.

“Charlie?” Vox said suddenly and Alastor frowned and twisted to watch a battered and bloodied princess stagger towards them, tears streaming down her cheeks as she held onto the tatters of her clothes.

“Help me!” she sobbed before a thick, thorny root clamped around her leg and dragged her into the void once more.

“Charlie!” Vox shouted, lurching forwards, and Alastor nearly joined him, but something was *wrong* and alarm bells screamed in his mind.

He caught Vox’s arm. “Wait! This might be a trap.”

Vox threw him a wild look. “That was Charlie!”

“Or an image of her sent to trick us,” Alastor said urgently. He glanced at his arm, at the word carved there. “What if this is part of the trial?”

“And what if it isn’t?” Vox insisted. “What if that’s really the princess and she managed to escape just long enough to find us before Roo snatched her back? We can’t leave her, Al! This is what we came here for, right?”

Alastor looked around them warily, at the everlasting expanse of darkness. Something was *off*. “We haven’t beaten the trial. Why would we suddenly run into Charlie? Roo is supposed to be practically wrapped around her, so surely we’d have to complete the trials before we can even *see* her?”

Vox frowned. “Maybe we don’t have to beat this trial. Maybe we don’t even have to compete. Maybe this is some sort of loophole. If we don’t beat the trial and we can rescue Charlie from Roo’s clutches, maybe we can walk out of here through the back door Lucifer mentioned and Roo can’t follow us and Purgatory’s programming will keep ticking.”

Alastor shook his head slowly. “...It *can*’t be that easy.”

Vox huffed a laugh. “I wouldn’t call it *easy*, sweetheart. I don’t think any of this has been easy. Either way, if I’m wrong and this is part of the trial, then we’re supposed to beat it to reach Charlie, but if I’m *right*, and Charlie has managed to somehow escape and we can reach her without completing the trials, then I’d say we’ve got little to lose and everything to gain.”

Alastor hesitated but couldn’t argue with that logic, so he nodded and couldn’t help but smile at Vox’s excited grin.

Vox slipped his hand into Alastor’s and they ran in the direction Charlie had vanished into.

When it became apparent that there was nothing but empty void ahead of them, Alastor slowed to a halt.

Vox looked around them. “Maybe we should try splitting up? Cover more ground?”

Alastor tightened his grip on his lover’s hand. “*Absolutely not*. Purgatory is a vast expanse of empty, looping, time-bending space. Who knows if we’ll find each other again? No, we’ll stick together.” It was *absurd* for Vox to even suggest such a thing.

“We have our frequencies,” Vox reminded. “Our static. We can communicate like that.”

“No,” said Alastor firmly, shooting Vox a disturbed look. “Purgatory is filled with tricks and illusions. We need to stay together.”

Vox shrugged and Alastor raised an eyebrow at his dismissiveness.

“We can’t keep wandering aimlessly through this void,” Vox said. “We could be searching for the rest of eternity. What do you suggest we do?”

Alastor frowned thoughtfully before Vox suddenly perked up. “Wait! I hear something.” He narrowed his eyes in concentration and Alastor’s ears pricked up, straining to hear something, *anything* through the eerie silence.

“This way,” Vox said excitedly, grabbing Alastor’s hand and dragging him in a different direction. Alastor’s ears swivelled, listening intently for any noise, but unlike Vox, he could only hear the surrounding silence and the soft sound of Vox’s internal components.

“What do you hear?” Alastor asked, confused as to why his sensitive hearing couldn’t pick up on whatever sound Vox’s audio inputs had.

“I’m not sure,” Vox admitted as he slowed when Alastor nearly stumbled over his own feet. “Wind, perhaps? Crying? I… I can’t quite make it out.”

Alastor’s ears strained against the silence and he was once again confused when he couldn’t hear anything. Still, if Vox said there was something, then Alastor believed him.

Suddenly, Vox came to a halt, looking quickly from left to right. “Damn it! They’ve split.” He scowled and Alastor’s ears flicked and twitched but still, he heard nothing.

No! Wait! He *could* hear something. Vox was right; the sounds were coming from opposite directions - sounds that Alastor couldn't make head nor tail of.

"You take the left, I take the right?" Vox suggested and again, Alastor threw him a bewildered look.

"Vox, we really shouldn't separate here. It's too dangerous. This may be some sort of trap."

"Of course it is," said Vox in exasperation. "One of these noises might be Charlie and the other is obviously a distraction. But there are two of us. We can figure out which is which if we separate."

Alastor stared at Vox for a long moment before taking a step backwards. "You're acting... oddly."

Vox raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I don't think I am."

"You are," Alastor said firmly. "You're not usually this dismissive. You don't casually put either of us at risk. You're aren't so quick to trust things that don't make sense and-" Alastor cut himself off, eying Vox warily. "We've already been separated," he murmured to himself. "You aren't my Vox."

It was Vox's turn to shoot Alastor a perturbed look. "What the fuck are you talking about? It's *me*. What do you mean 'we've already been separated'?"

"I don't think you are," Alastor said warily. "I think this is my trial."

"The trial hasn't started," Vox said exasperatedly. "Or- or maybe it has, I don't know. Maybe we haven't found it yet. Maybe we're leading up to it. But I'm *me*, Alastor. I promise I'm really me. Look, we're both tired-

“No,” growled Alastor. “Something is wrong here. You’re being far too blasé about all of this. Almost reckless. An hour ago you almost killed yourself and now you’re practically *chipper*. You’re *not* Vox.”

Electricity jumped between Vox’s antennae and his gentle smile suddenly fell as his gaze turned hollow and weary.

“Because I’m trying to forget!” Vox said desperately, voice bursting with pain and guilt. “I’m trying to forget what I put you through! I’m trying to forget how I felt and what I thought and that I *betrayed* you, and now you’ll probably never trust me again because I’m such an asshole and- and I’ve ruined *everything* because I couldn’t hold on, because I’m not as strong as you. I’ve never been as strong as you.”

His words cracked and Alastor reached out for his hand, chest aching with guilt, and he rubbed Vox’s knuckles soothingly with his thumb.

“Of course I trust you, Vox. And you haven’t ruined anything. You haven’t betrayed me. I’m sorry I said what I did; I was upset and afraid and I thought... I thought I was going to lose you. But you pulled yourself out of it, you faced your fear because you *are* strong, my dear. You always have been.”

“I couldn’t even beat one trial on my own,” Vox mumbled. “How can you possibly believe that? And the moment I lose contact with you, the moment I had to face something truly alone, I *failed*. If it hadn’t been for your quick-thinking-”

“You beat the first trial without my help,” Alastor said softly. “And you rescued me in the third, even when I was *eating* you. You stopped me from sacrificing myself when you faced your parents. Don’t you see, Vox? You’ve saved me as many times as I’ve saved you. That’s the point. We are stronger together *because* we support each other. There is a reason souls don’t get very far when they attempt these trials alone. They’re meant to break us. There is no shame in needing and accepting help here, my love.”

Vox sent him a glassy look before managing a weak smile and Alastor brushed his fingers down the edge of his screen before a scream of agony caught their attention.

A scream that came from two different directions.

Alastor's ears lowered nervously. That sounded a lot like Charlie.

There was a wet noise followed by a choked sob and Alastor swallowed, anxiety climbing as he glanced left, then right.

"Which way?" Vox asked quietly, just as haunted by the noises.

"I don't-" Alastor cut himself off as there was another wail from Charlie. "I don't know if this is real or not."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe this is all fake. A distraction. Part of our trial?" Vox whispered, but his eyes were wide and sparks danced over his frame with his rising distress.

"And if I'm wrong, Charlie is being *tortured*," Alastor said, wincing at another anguished scream and the sound of wet tearing. His heart raced and he was surprised by how *nauseous* he felt at the idea of sweet, innocent Charlie being forced to suffer the sort of pain and cruelty that even the worst demons in Hell could only dream of inflicting.

"Which way?" Vox repeated and Alastor squared his jaw.

"You take right, I take left."

Vox nodded and sprinted away and Alastor watched him go worriedly before racing in the opposite direction.

He followed Charlie's screams, twisting and turning through the darkness for an hour before he realised that the screams weren't changing in volume. They were still as far away as they had been when he'd started running.

He panted, sinking to his knees as he caught his breath and he winced at yet another agonised howl. He remembered his deal with Charlie and checked their contract and he clenched his fists in irritation when the line of magic ran directly *upwards*.

He looked up tiredly before lowering his head as he sucked in breath after breath.

A low, thrumming frequency caught his attention and he frowned in confusion as it began to pulse, oscillating faster then slower, and producing a wide variety of pitches.

Vox? What had he found? He was clearly trying to gain Alastor's attention but he didn't *feel* all that distressed, so surely he couldn't have found Charlie? His frequency felt excited and nervous and *urgent*.

Alastor found a harmony with Vox's frequency, reassuring and concerned and curious, and when Vox didn't answer, Alastor tilted his head in confusion.

"Vox?" he called.

No response.

"What have you found? I can feel you," he tried again.

"Alastor!"

Alastor startled and turned to find Vox jogging towards him. Had Alastor been walking in circles all this time?

"Did you find Charlie?" Alastor asked slowly, climbing to his feet as Vox doubled over and panted heavily.

He shook his head. “No.”

“What *did* you find?” Alastor asked curiously. “I felt your frequency. You were... excited. Urgent.”

Vox glanced over at him as his chest heaved with exertion. “I found a door. I thought Charlie would be behind it, but it was just Val.”

Alastor straightened, looking behind Vox quickly. “Where is he?”

Vox frowned. “...In his trial? Fury, I think.”

Alastor blinked. “...You didn’t bring him with you?” he asked, shocked.

Vox licked his lips and frowned. “Alastor, I couldn’t get through the door. It was locked.”

“Then how do you know Valentino was in there? How do you know which trial he was facing?”

Vox scowled and stood to his full height. “Because on the door it said ‘*Valentino: Fury*’ in big, red letters.” He pressed his lips together. “What exactly are you accusing me of?”

Alastor swallowed and shook his head apologetically. “Nothing,” he murmured. “Show me where you found the door. Maybe we can help him.”

Vox caught his shoulder as he started in the direction the Television Demon had come from, and Alastor tensed instinctively, memories flashing back to his Fear trial before he shoved them down again.

“At this point, Charlie is more important,” Vox said firmly and as he finished the sentence, another terrible scream echoed through the air. “Val can wait.”

“Valentino may be able to help us,” Alastor said. “He can fly. He can reach places that we can’t. And once we rescue Charlie, Roo will be on our tail. If we want Valentino to have any chance of escape, we have to rescue him *now*.”

Vox frowned before nodding and gesturing for Alastor to follow him. It wasn’t long before they came to the door Vox had described.

Alastor tugged at it and as Vox had said, it remained locked. He walked around the door curiously and tried it from the other end, but once again, he was unsuccessful.

“Could be another deception,” Vox suggested. “A way to distract us from Charlie. Val might not even be in there.”

“Shouldn’t we check?” Alastor asked, sending Vox an odd glance. It was almost as though Vox didn’t *want* to rescue Valentino...

Alastor crouched down, peering through the keyhole beneath the handle. There was nothing but darkness for a few seconds, before a pair of agonised yellow eyes with red pupils appeared *directly in front of the keyhole*.

Alastor jerked backwards in surprise before his breath hitched and he kicked at the door.

“Charlie’s in there!” he snarled, growling when the door didn’t so much as rattle.

Vox stiffened before racing to Alastor’s side, and when pounding on the door didn’t work, Vox returned to the other side of the door and tugged at the handle whilst Alastor *pushed* and

suddenly, the door swung open and Alastor fell through the frame, landing on top of Vox as they tumbled to the ground.

“No,” Alastor muttered as he looked back at the open door with its empty frame. There was no room, no Charlie, just more endless void.

He stood and stepped through the frame again, watching Vox dust himself off from the other side.

“She was right there,” Alastor whispered. “There was a room, there *had* to be a room because she was *inside* it. How can the room be *gone*?”

Vox clambered to his feet with a sorrowful look. “Come on. Let’s keep looking. She *has* to be around here somewhere.”

Alastor shuffled after Vox with one last confused look at the door.

They walked for *hours*, passing more false doors that led into rooms that disappeared the moment the doors were forced open. Charlie’s screams continued to echo throughout Purgatory, growing no louder and no quieter as they walked, and the wet tearing sounds and heavy *thumps* became more frequent the longer they wandered.

It was *maddening*. Anxiety-inducing. And soon, there were words between the screams, pleas for Alastor and Vox to *help*, whimpers and begs for them to save her, sobs of torment and descriptions of the pain she was feeling after every hit and kick and *bite* and who knew what else she was facing.

“I’m *dying*!”

“It hurts! Oh, Alastor, everything *hurts*. ”

“Please save me! Please save me, Alastor!”

“I can’t take this anymore.”

“My *hands*... Look what she’s done to them...”

“Why won’t you save me? Why won’t you help me, Alastor?”

“Why are you letting her hurt me?”

Alastor’s head ducked lower and lower the further they walked, until eventually, he had to stop, merely to *breathe*.

He released a shaky breath when Vox wrapped his arms around him gently and pulled him to his chest. Alastor melted against him as Vox stroked his ears.

“We’ll find her,” Vox murmured.

“What if we can’t?” Alastor whispered.

“We keep trying until we do,” Vox said before he propped his head on top of Alastor’s, then stilled after a few moments. “Alastor.”

Alastor made a soft sound of query as he buried his face into Vox’s throat, nuzzling and kissing his neck and pushing closer to his lover in search of comfort.

“Look up there.”

Alastor frowned and looked up, reluctantly.

There was a door above them, flat on its face and pointing down at them.

Alastor stared at it for a few moments before Vox made a thoughtful noise. “Give me a boost up, would you?”

Alastor kneeled so that Vox could carefully settle atop his shoulders and he lifted Vox towards the door, surprised when the handle turned easily at his touch.

An icy wind whipped around Alastor’s ears and his tail flashed in alarm as fine, silk-like tree roots curled around Vox’s shoulders and yanked him through the door into the dark room within.

“Vox!” Alastor yelled, heart beating as fast as a drumroll as he leapt up to grab onto his lover’s foot, but it was too late, and Vox’s screams were muted as the door slammed shut behind him.

Alastor whirled around, looking left and right and up and down frantically for any signs of Vox.

There were the sounds of crunching and snapping, followed by an almighty *crack* and an electronic screech from Vox, and Alastor couldn’t *think*, so he let his instincts take over and he *ran*.

He ran and ran, sprinting through the darkness, ears swivelling and eyes wide and fearful, and his legs began to throb and ache, but still he ran.

There were no longer any doors and Alastor’s antlers rose from his skull, body growing spindly and twisting into something monstrous as pure panic and adrenaline took over.

He could hear something running in front of him. No, not running. One needed legs to run.

There was cracking and rattling and crunching and Alastor chased the sound like a hungry wolf chased a deer, and when his body began to protest, he gritted his teeth and pushed himself harder, faster, chest heaving and tongue lolling out of his mouth as his lungs *burned*, and the darkness was blinding and disorientating, but still he ran.

A door appeared in front of him and he didn't slow down, didn't hesitate, merely lowered his antlers and rammed through the thick oak like a raging, terrified bull, and it *hurt*, and one of his antlers sheared off as his shoulders grew red and sore from the impact.

He nearly fell to his knees, but he saved himself at the last moment and continued to run, then skidded to a halt when he noticed the great beast before him.

It towered over Alastor on six legs made of trees and grasses and dead trunks and its body looped around and around like a huge serpent, filled with shrubs and funghi and rocks. Its wings were made of thousands of rotting roots and mosses, and its head bore no eyes, merely hundreds of trees and vines and bushes, with teeth of sharpened driftwood.

Roots coiled and twisted around its body, constantly in motion, continuously shifting and catching the rocks and shrubbery that fell from it, and either side of its shoulders, there were two thick, thorny roots - one curled tightly around a battered, unconscious Charlie, and the other wrapped around a freshly bloodied Vox.

Alastor swallowed, then bared his teeth at the creature. "Let them go!" he roared.

The creatures hissed and an icy wind whipped around it, biting at Alastor's ears and forcing them to lower.

"Come get them, little fawn," whispered Roo's voice from the creature's gaping mouth.

Roots soared towards him and Alastor bounded over and between them like a hunted deer.

He dodged and danced around the creature's strikes, slashing his claws viciously through any finer roots and yanking at the vines that wound around his body, tearing them off the creature.

It howled in pain and frustration, and Alastor dialed swung erratically as he ducked and fought, and he leapt upon the monster's side and clawed his way up to Vox, crying out in agony when thorny roots whipped at his back and stomach before impaling into his legs and dragging him back to the ground.

"Alastor!" Vox screamed and Alastor rolled out of the way of another attack before hurling himself at the monster again, scaling its side quickly and gripping the trunks at its back before the rock beneath his hooves crumbled and he slipped and fell.

A vine caught him mid-fall and slammed him against the ground and Alastor coughed up blood before choking as the chain around his throat was summoned, attached to one of the creature's roots. It threw him around like a rag doll and he crumpled to the floor, gasping for breath as his mouth filled with blood.

He was pretty sure a few of his ribs were broken.

Still, he staggered to his feet, the stitches at his mouth pulling tighter at the beast's command, and he threw himself at the monster - at *Roo* - once more, slicing through roots and vines as his chest burned and his body throbbed.

He reached Vox finally, clawing desperately at the thorny roots, uncaring if they tore his hands open, and Roo made a noise of agony before Vox and Alastor fell at least thirty feet to the floor.

A vine raced towards Vox's screen and Alastor grabbed his shoulders and rolled them both to the side as the vine struck where Vox's head had been moments ago, and Alastor pounced on it viciously, biting at it before it could have a second shot at them.

A root smashed into his back, jolting his broken ribs, and he screamed in agony and crashed to his knees.

Vox gripped the root and burned it to a crisp before dragging Alastor away from the monster.

“Stay here. I’ll get Charlie,” he said hurriedly before running towards the monster.

Alastor’s eyes widened. “*No!*” he cried out, throwing a hand towards Vox as he forced himself to his hooves and stumbled, clutching his collapsed chest.

He watched in horror as Vox dodged the first and second root, before the third smashed through his screen. Vox staggered and fell, and there were more roots impaling his body, bursting through his flesh like it was paper, and Vox howled and screamed and thrashed as the roots lifted him off the ground.

Two great antlers made of hundreds of dead and broken trees rose from the creature’s head, and Vox was thrown onto them, pushed further and further, until nearly every inch of him was impaled by dead, rotting wood.

His screams cut off as he fell limp.

Roo chuckled darkly as the roots plucked Vox off her antlers, huge chunks of wood still lodged inside him, and she threw him on the ground and crushed his broken body beneath a heavy foot.

Alastor watched in stunned silence. It had all happened so fast. No more than ten seconds had passed between Vox leaving Alastor’s side and being crushed under Roo’s heel.

When Roo lifted her foot, Vox’s body was obliterated into tiny fragments of synthetic flesh and metal, and Alastor watched, speechless as a brilliant white light floated up from Vox’s remains before turning grey and disintegrating into smoke.

His *soul*.

Alastor couldn't *breathe*.

He couldn't *think*.

He couldn't *move*.

He stood, staring at the shattered mess that had once been his lover like a deer in headlights as his whole world burst into flames, and every memory, every sweet word they had shared, every comforting touch, every milestone of healing, and every cherished moment flooded his mind, drowning him, suffocating him.

He would never have any of those things again.

He would never *see* Vox again.

Would never hold him or touch him or talk to him or kiss him or see that brilliant smile of his.

Vox was gone.

Vox was *gone*. *Forever*.

He hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye. Hadn't told Vox that he loved him.

He hadn't even *helped*.

Alastor's legs gave out and he bellowed in anguish, clutching his erratic heart as tears flowed freely down his bloodied and beaten face. Static crackled powerfully around him, burning the creature's closest roots, and Alastor's frequency screeched with torment and agony and *despair*, and it *hurt* Alastor, but he didn't care because Vox was *dead*.

Roo vanished into the void with a bitter gust of wind, taking Charlie with her.

Alastor crawled over to Vox, every step agony, and he gazed down at the fragments of flesh and metal and glass and severed cables that had once been a person, and he wailed and sobbed and gathered pieces of Vox into his hands, clutching at them as he slumped over the unrecognisable remains of the man he loved.

"Vox!" he cried hysterically, breaths far too fast and body shaking violently as his vision blurred and his head swam and bile crawled up his throat. "You promised you wouldn't leave me! You promised we were in this together!" He gathered the rubble of his lover closer as he bawled.

After how hard they had fought, after everything they had faced together, Vox's death had been *meaningless*.

Alastor's shaking fingers closed around what remained of Vox's damaged antenna and he cradled it close, kissing its rounded tip as his shoulders shook with sobs.

Two minutes ago, Vox had been dragging him away from Roo, *protecting* him, and now...

Alastor had watched as his soul had been extinguished. He had done *nothing* to save his lover.

Merely stared, like a dumb animal.

He couldn't breathe. He was going to be sick. Vox was dead, and he wasn't ever coming back. Alastor would never see him again and it was *his* fault because he hadn't been quick enough, and Vox must have felt so much *pain* and Alastor had merely *watched* and-

He passed out.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Character death... sort of?

So many of you guessed correctly! I'm so proud of you all ;)

Chapter 65: Illusions Of Despair

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Alastor curled around the remains of his lover, clutching the snapped, crimped antenna close to his chest.

He had no more tears left to shed and his voice had grown hoarse. His broken ribs made it hurt to breathe and his battered body throbbed and ached and *burned*.

He didn't have the strength to get up, didn't see any point in trying since he couldn't beat Roo. He couldn't rescue Charlie and he had lost Vox, so there was no hope of returning to Hell and he didn't want to. He didn't want to return to Hell empty-handed and live an afterlife of loneliness and misery, drowning in memories and thoughts of what could have been if only he had acted quicker, if he had *saved* Vox, like Vox had saved him so many times before.

He pressed his lips to the tip of the antenna, imagining Vox was wrapped in his arms, safe and warm and smiling.

His shoulders shook in a silent sob and he squeezed his eyes shut, unable to look at the brutal mess of blood and metal and synthetic flesh beside him any longer.

He wished Roo would come back and finish him off. He wouldn't fight. The peace would be welcome. He wondered why she hadn't killed him before she had left and he cursed her for it.

He lost track of how long he stayed like that, curled around Vox's bloodied, fragmented remains. It could have been hours or days, he didn't care. He clung to Vox's antenna and

hoped his injuries would eventually cause him to fade away, and when they didn't, his weak, shaky fingers closed around a shard of Vox's screen.

He stared at the jagged edges for a moment, then set it against his throat.

He hesitated, ears pinned, before his hand trembled and he dropped the shard and put his hands over his face, screaming into them in frustration.

He couldn't do it. He had made Vox promise never to end his own life, so how could Alastor possibly end his?

Vox had been willing to sacrifice his own life to save Alastor, so that meant Alastor had to live. He had to live because Vox would want him to.

He pried his eyes open and gazed at the crushed mess beside him, and he drew his fingers through the bloody remains, imagining he was grazing his fingers down Vox's chest and stomach in a final goodbye.

He staggered weakly to his hooves and placed the snapped antenna in his pocket, holding his broken ribs as he left Vox for the last time.

He limped through the darkness in silence and he found his memories wandering to happier times with his lover, to warm smiles and ridiculous jokes and passionate dancing beside a canal, and Alastor gritted his teeth, bowing his head as he walked through the endless void.

He walked and walked until he couldn't walk any further and he sank to his knees, trembling. When he opened his eyes, Vox's smashed remains were scattered in front of him in a pool of clotted blood and Alastor gasped and scrambled backwards, falling onto his ass.

"Why?" he begged as his head fell into his hands. "Why did you do this?"

“I don’t need both of you,” purred a breathy voice. “He was weak. He’s always been weak.”

“He was *helping* you!” Alastor screamed. “He would have helped you to escape!”

“He was helping Charlie,” Roo whispered. “Now you understand what’s at stake here. Now you understand why you must play by the rules. Free me, Alastor, and you won’t suffer his fate.”

Alastor drew his knees to his chest. “Bring him back.”

“You know I can’t.”

“Why would you kill him?” Alastor roared. “Why would I *ever* help you now?”

“You’ll be trapped here.”

“So be it,” Alastor growled, glancing at Vox’s remains before wincing and averting his gaze again.

There was a pause. “Hear that, little lamb? The tired fawn has given up on you. It seems as though we get to have some more fun.”

There was an anguished sob and Alastor’s ears twitched at Charlie’s pleading. “Alastor, please, no... Please help... Please don’t abandon me... You can’t... You can’t leave me... You abandoned Vox, don’t give up on me too.”

Alastor flinched and curled tighter in on himself. “I can’t save you,” he whispered. “I can’t fight her. I’m sorry, Charlie. I’m not strong enough.”

There was a wretched wail from Charlie before Roo laughed and an icy breeze tickled Alastor's ears. His chain shimmered into view and he was yanked forwards, falling face first into the blood and metal before him.

Alastor lowered his head in submission, too tired to fight. Maybe this was it. Maybe she'd kill him now. Maybe it would all finally be over.

"Come now, Alastor. Where's that fiery attitude of yours? The determination?"

Alastor closed his eyes.

"I knew you'd be of no real use to me," she taunted. "From the moment you made that deal with me in the bookshop, I could see you weren't strong enough to release me. You aren't even worth the effort of killing. I may as well feed on you until you finally scrape up the courage to drive a piece of your lover's screen into your throat."

Alastor was so exhausted.

"Go on," Roo goaded. "You want peace, don't you? You want all the pain and misery and despair to end, don't you? Kill yourself, Alastor. End it all. There's nothing you can do to save the half-dead princess. You can't bring your lover back. There's nothing left for you here, sweet fawn. You will find happiness in death, in the endless nothing. Pick up the glass beside your right hand."

Alastor's fingers twitched.

And then something *happened*.

Something that made his breath hitch and his eyes fly open and his hand clutch at his battered chest.

A frequency clashed with his, despairing and angry and heartbroken and bursting with *love*.

Alastor couldn't move, merely stared at the sticky mess of wires and metal and blood beneath him, body still doubled over and head still low.

He responded quickly, wrapping his frequency around this impossible one and filling it with joy and shock and excitement and *hope*.

Was this real? Could this really be Vox's frequency? Was Vox still *alive*?

There was confusion from the other frequency. Confusion and blind panic and fury and *despair* and-

Despair.

Alastor froze. He stared at the mess beneath him, then slowly kneeled as hope sparked in his chest.

"Me dying would be counterproductive to you," Alastor said slowly as his mind raced. He gestured to Vox's remains. "*Vox* dying would be counterproductive because you know that we need each other to complete the trials. That's why you brought *both* of us here in the first place. There's only one creature that would benefit from Vox and I killing ourselves - and we *would* have to kill ourselves because *you can't*."

Alastor glowered up into the darkness, baring his teeth as he clambered unsteadily to his hooves. "You're not Roo." He gestured to the illusion below him. "And that isn't Vox."

His gaze darted to his wrist and he rolled up his sleeve, smirking at the word carved there. "*This* is my trial. Despair at losing Vox. Despair at not being fast enough to save him. Despair from the guilt of *failing* him when he trusts me so deeply."

Alastor smiled viciously when he received no response. “And then you rub salt into the wound by flaunting Charlie in front of me? Taunting me about how I’ve failed *both* of them. Humiliating me by reminding me that I’m still on *her* chain. Preventing me from escaping the visual of Vox’s broken body - a reminder that it’s my fault that he’s dead.”

Alastor reached into his pocket for the snapped antenna and he smiled at it hopefully. “The thing is, Vox isn’t *dead*. He’s here somewhere, holding on, fighting his own trial, and he doesn’t realise that he’s just *saved* me. So, I’m going to find him and I’m going to tell him.” He narrowed his eyes. “And then we’re completing these damn trials and we’re going to rescue Charlie, and we’re going to have our happy ending because we *fucking deserve it*.”

“You’ll *never* reach him,” whispered Purgatory in Roo’s voice. “He’s too far gone.”

“Oh, I’ll reach him. Nothing can stop me, not even you,” Alastor said as he tossed the snapped antenna onto the ground and focused on Vox’s anxious, wild frequency.

Something was wrong. Vox was... *Upset* didn’t even begin to cover it. Something was happening. Vox was losing control of his emotions, frantic and despairing and Alastor struggled to find a frequency that he would notice.

So, amidst his own panic, he tried to soothe Vox, to nestle his frequency into Vox’s protectively and Vox *clung* to him before his frequency suddenly cut off.

For a moment, Alastor couldn’t breathe and he glanced back at the shattered mess behind him, but then he shook his head and inhaled a steady breath.

He trusted Vox not to make another attempt on his own life - Vox wouldn’t put him through that again. No, there had to be another explanation. Why else would his frequency cut out after being so panicked and desperate?

A crash.

Vox had crashed, overwhelmed by his own feelings.

So, where was he?

Alastor looked around the darkness. He could be wandering for hours, weeks, *months*. He had to think. He had to be clever about this. How could he find Vox when they had been whisked away to their own trials?

Frequencies.

A grin swept across his face. He needed Vox to wake up so that he could use the Television Demon's frequency to locate him - a little like echolocation. Purgatory obviously couldn't imitate their frequencies, couldn't even imitate their static, which Alastor and Vox could use to their advantage - like their own little secret language.

Alastor closed his eyes and amplified his frequency, filling it with love and comfort and reassurance for when Vox awoke.

Vox awoke slowly and peacefully, feeling far more relaxed than he had when he had crashed.

He opened his eyes and found himself in a familiar bed.

Alastor's bed.

With Alastor's frequency curled around his, filled with love and comfort and reassurance.

He blinked in confusion and sat upright, before sending a pulse of query and confusion to Alastor.

Alastor's frequency oscillated with excitement and happiness and a smile crept slowly across Vox's face as he nestled against Alastor's warmth and affection.

And then, Alastor stepped through the door with... breakfast?

A hearty breakfast. With glazed pastries and fruit and meats and cheeses and sweetened coffee, which he carried to Vox on a tray. He perched beside Vox on the bed with a soft smile and Vox tilted his head curiously.

"I'm sorry," Alastor said quietly. "I was being unfair to you. I was upset and frustrated and *angry* at myself for not being quicker, for letting you think that I wouldn't save you, that the only way out was to end your own life, and I took my feelings out on you because you were... convenient. When I saw you with Valentino, I got *jealous*."

Vox blinked, trying to wrap his head around this new development. Alastor no longer seemed *angry* at him.

"I shouldn't have been so hard on you," Alastor said with a guilty frown. "You only did what you thought was right. You were trying to save *all* of us. I can't fault you for that."

Vox cautiously tangled their frequencies together and although his face didn't show it, Alastor's signal was bursting with love and relief and *need*.

A smile pulled at Vox's lips and his hand slid across the bed to curl around Alastor's arm affectionately. He pulsed adoring static into Alastor's body and although Alastor didn't return the gesture, he did glance at Vox with an apologetic smile.

"I've missed you," Vox said gently, heart lifting for the first time in *weeks*.

"I've missed you too, picturebox," Alastor murmured, laying his hand atop Vox's.

Alastor's frequency fluttered against his, happy and curious and... urgent?

Vox's brows pinched together as he watched Alastor's expression for any signs of danger. When he found none, he pulsed another query in return and Alastor's frequency became more insistent, more *rushed*.

"What's wrong, Al?" Vox asked worriedly as he squeezed his lover's arm. "Why the urgency?"

Alastor raised his eyebrows, looking genuinely confused. "Urgency? Whatever do you mean, my dear?"

Vox placed a hand over his chest and tapped at his sternum with a finger and once again, Alastor's eyebrows furrowed quizzically.

"You seem a little... stressed," Vox said as Alastor's frequency grew a bit more demanding, winding around him and falling in and out of harmony before prickling at him almost desperately.

Alastor stared at him for a long moment before an easy smile settled over his face. "I suppose I'm still a little upset with myself. Anxious about whether you will forgive me or not."

Vox's gaze softened and he sent a burst of tender static through Alastor's arm. Again, Alastor didn't react but there was a tension between his shoulders, so Vox put it down to that.

"Al, you know I'll always forgive you. We've come too far to start holding grudges now."

Alastor let out a soft huff of relief. "We *did* beat Purgatory, I suppose."

“Exactly!” Vox said, daring to hope for the first time since returning to Hell. His smile faltered. “...You know I’m sorry, right? You know I never meant to leave you or abandon you or make you suffer alone, right? You know I didn’t really choose Valentino over you? I thought... I thought I could save everyone, but I didn’t think about what that meant for you and I... I’m sorry, Al.”

“We all make mistakes,” Alastor said softly before handing Vox the tray of breakfast treats. “Eat, my love. You’ll feel better.”

He stood and Vox looked up at him in alarm, blood going cold at the idea of him leaving.

“How’s your silhouette been since coming back home?” Vox asked quickly, rolling with the first thing that came to mind.

Alastor looked at him in surprise. “My silhouette...?” Then he blinked as though remembering something and he smiled widely again. “Oh, you know... Same as usual.”

Vox frowned. “Wait, really? We’ve been gone a year and it isn’t giving you any trouble whatsoever?”

Alastor’s ears twitched. “Nope.”

“It’s... fine?” Vox asked incredulously. “After not existing for so long, it hasn’t gone... feral?”

“No,” said Alastor. “Not really.”

Vox tilted his head curiously. “Can I see it? It’s been a while since we talked.” He patted the bed in invitation.

Alastor’s ears twitched again. “It’s tired. Exhausted, really. Doesn’t want to come out.”

Vox raised an eyebrow, giving his lover an unimpressed look. “It *always* wants to come out, Al. You’re the one stopping it. Let it stretch its legs. I haven’t seen it for a long time.”

Alastor’s smile grew sharper. “I’m quite busy, Vox. Maybe another time.” He turned and Vox recoiled, stomach sinking in dread once more.

“Wait! Al, don’t go! I-” He cut himself off, looking away embarrassedly. “I want you to sit with me. I missed you. I need... I need the comfort. I need you.”

There was a long pause before Alastor sighed and rounded the bed before swinging delicately onto it. He propped himself up on the headboard and clasped his hands over his lap. “I suppose those other things can wait.”

Vox beamed, frequency harmonising with Alastor’s ecstatically before he slid closer to his lover then stilled. “Can I... Can I touch you?”

Alastor eyed him and opened his arms carefully in invitation and Vox’s antennae buzzed with happy charge as he snuggled against his lover and shared breakfast with him. His playful, loving static went unanswered throughout the morning, but it didn’t matter because Alastor was holding him again and his frequency was protective and concerned.

“Stop worrying,” Vox whispered. “I’ve already forgiven you.” And he meant it.

Alastor raised an eyebrow and said nothing.

Over the next few days, Alastor’s words and actions grew softer and more affectionate but his frequency grew more distressed and worried and urgent.

All attempts to confront Alastor about his mixed signals resulted in Alastor smiling tenderly and assuring him that nothing was wrong and that perhaps it was some sort of lingering distortion after being in Purgatory for so long.

Which was bullshit.

Because Alastor had *also* made no attempts to return any of Vox's static.

And then there were the *kisses*. Cold, empty, passionless kisses that caught Vox off-guard. Almost robotic. The same with the touches. They hadn't had sex because Vox didn't want to push after everything Alastor had faced in Purgatory and Alastor didn't seem inclined to try either, but Alastor's touches had lost their warmth and tenderness. Everything was mechanical, as though Alastor was merely going through the motions because those things were what Vox wanted, but not necessarily what he wanted.

Something was *wrong*.

Vox just couldn't figure out what.

"Look me in the eye and tell me you're fine," Vox said irritably and Alastor frowned at him as he worked through a stack of paperwork, likely something for the hotel.

"I'm fine," Alastor said with a tense smile. "As I keep telling you, *dear*."

"Horseshit!" Vox snapped as he focused on his lover's desperate, clearly upset frequency and attempted to soothe it. "Something is bothering you. Why won't you confide in me? We *always* talk to each other."

Alastor huffed in frustration. "Because *nothing* is wrong, Vox. There's nothing to tell. No big secrets. Now please, I'm quite *busy*."

A spark bounced between Vox's antennae and his static prickled Alastor's skin in annoyance. Again he received no response.

"And that's another thing. You say everything's fine, yet you haven't *once* returned my static. You haven't let me see your silhouette. You're clearly still mad at me!" Vox said.

"I'm not currently mad at you, my dear, but I will be if you keep going around in circles," Alastor said with a tight smile. "Nothing is wrong."

He read through another page and signed at the bottom and as he flipped it over, Vox placed his hand atop it with narrowed eyes.

"Talk to me," Vox demanded and Alastor sent him a hard glare.

"There is nothing to talk about," Alastor said. "You're the one behaving oddly."

Vox shook his head angrily, dropping his gaze as he once again focused on Alastor's confusing frequency.

He stared at the document Alastor was reading through, eyes widening a fraction as he realised what was actually written upon it.

The words '*Hazbin Hotel*' were repeated over and over for the full length of the page. No other words, no other information, not even a dotted line for Alastor to sign upon.

Vox stared before slowly lifting his gaze to Alastor. Alastor gazed back at him, making no indication that he recognised there was anything abnormal about the document he was signing.

Vox licked his lips and straightened and as he did so, static raced along his antennae - static that wasn't *his*.

He stared at Alastor a moment longer before taking a cautious step backwards.

There was another worried pulse of static at the edge of his screen and another at his neck, tender and frantic and *distraught*.

Alastor blinked at him placidly.

Vox's breath hitched as a burst of static fired at the ports at the back of his head, another at his palm, and he cradled his hand as he watched Alastor tilt his head in query.

Vox plastered on a false smile.

"You're probably right. I think... I think I'm just tired."

Alastor stared at him a bit too intensely before he smiled sharply and Vox was suddenly struck by how little he recognised the man in front of him.

"Perhaps some rest would do you good, my dear," Alastor said and Vox retreated a step as another pulse of desperate static tickled both sides of his screen.

Alastor's smile dimmed, eyes flashing with something Vox didn't recognise.

"You're not him," Vox whispered and Alastor stood with a scowl.

"Vox..."

Vox scrambled backwards, gasping at the *pressure* against the top of his screen and the constant, gentle flow of static there as another steady wave of static pulsed through the ports at the back of his head.

Alastor prowled towards him, like a predator stalking its prey.

“Where is he?” Vox demanded as he backed away from the fake Radio Demon.

“You’re clearly unwell,” Alastor said with a false smile. “Rest, my love. Here, let me take you to bed.”

“Don’t call me that,” Vox snapped as he jerked away from Alastor’s outstretched hand. “What the fuck have you done with Alastor?”

“I *am* Alastor.”

“No. You’re just a cheap copy,” Vox spat, touching his screen as he focused on the distressed static filtering through it. “Where is he? I can *feel* him. What have you done with him? Why is he so upset?”

Vox startled when Alastor suddenly appeared in front of him - like a glitch in reality - and his claws wrapped around Vox’s shoulder painfully tight.

Vox flooded his body with electricity and Alastor’s eyes blew wide, the skin on his hand and arm burning as he let out a grating scream.

“Vox, stop!”

Vox flipped their positions with a snarl, slamming Alastor against the wall behind them as he drowned the fake Radio Demon in electricity, and Alastor threw him a wild look.

“Vox, please! You’re hurting me!”

Vox *almost* faltered.

Tears of agony sprung to Alastor’s eyes. “There’s so much pain,” he whimpered. “Why? Why won’t you stop?”

His ears lowered and he ground his teeth together, and blood and burns spread over his skin like paint spilling over a canvas.

“You were supposed to protect me,” Alastor cried.

Vox snatched his hands away, eyes wide as fear filled his chest, and he watched the bloodied Alastor crumple to the ground, shaking and whining.

Vox stared at him. “Tell me you’re not real,” he said desperately. “Tell me where the real Alastor is.”

“I *am* the real Alastor,” Alastor sobbed, unable to lift his head as his skin sizzled. “Why won’t you believe me? Why are you hurting me?”

“Because you’re not him!” Vox snarled, snapping his mouth shut when Alastor flinched, ears lying flat in submission.

“Whatever you want me to say, Vox. I’m not him,” Alastor whispered. “Please don’t hurt me again.”

Vox felt sick and he lifted a hand to his screen in confusion. *Was* this the real Alastor? There was still static at his head and ports, but now it seemed panicked and frantic and-

What if this was Alastor and Vox had just-

What if-

His screen glitched and he squeezed his eyes shut. The frequency was desperate now, terrified even, and oh *fuck*, had Vox just *burned* the man he was supposed to love?

His processor ached and rising temperature warnings bombarded his internal messages and he staggered backwards as he stared at the broken and abused Radio Demon. He was losing his mind. He was clearly going insane. Purgatory had *destroyed* him and now he was taking it out on Alastor and-

Alastor coughed up a pool of clotted blood and managed to lift his head enough to shoot Vox a betrayed, frightened look. He seemed paler than he had a moment ago and there was bone and muscle exposed at his face. Had Vox really done that much damage? He stared at Alastor in horror before the Radio Demon coughed again and collapsed fully.

Vox raced over to him, screen glitching and heart racing as bile crawled up his throat and tears prickled his eyes. Alastor's ears were practically melted. His lovely, soft ears.

Vox's breaths came quick and shallow and he clutched his chest, suddenly unable to control his own body as the stench of burning flesh hit his sensors.

"Shit, shit, shit," Vox chanted as his face glitched and a ringing sound grew louder and louder until it was all he could hear as his hands fluttered uselessly over Alastor's ruined body. His clothes and his skin and his hair were melted and crispy and Vox lurched to the side and vomited, but nothing came up and he couldn't remember the last time he had actually eaten. Tears blurred his vision and he couldn't think what to do because he had *attacked* Alastor and he couldn't breathe or move or-

A soothing frequency accompanied by comforting pulses of static through his screen and ports captured his attention.

He closed his eyes, focusing on the sensation as his breathing slowed and his glitching stopped and his mind cleared.

He focused on returning the gentle static and affectionate frequency, filling his own with longing and *need*, and he was rewarded with relief and *grief* from the other end.

Alastor.

Vox stood slowly and cast his gaze down to the crumpled, unconscious man below him.

He stepped over him without a word, held on tight to the frequency harmonising with his own, and marched towards its source.

Eyes turned to him as he walked. Every eye from every sinner in the city, and there was an ominous, programmed feel to the place that Vox hadn't noticed before. He frowned and headed towards the rubble of a long-forgotten bookshop.

Of course.

Vox smiled bitterly.

He hesitated at the tap on his shoulder and turned to find Valentino looking at him sadly.

“You could be happy here,” he said gently. “We could reset things. Let you live a happy life in peace.”

Vox frowned. “This isn't living,” he whispered. “This is just... existing.”

“This is the last offer we can give you,” Valentino said. “Once you return to him, there’s no going back. The Root will kill you both. You could be happy here. Safe.”

“I’d rather die fighting beside him than live in a false world, knowing that he suffered alone,” Vox said firmly and he startled when an entirely healed Alastor appeared beside Valentino with a frown of his own.

“We could be free. All three of us,” Alastor said quietly as the black chain at his neck shimmered into view and began to crumble. “We could start again, live the life you always wanted for us.”

Valentino placed a hand on Alastor’s shoulder, squeezing affectionately and Alastor smiled up at him before the two of them looked hopefully at Vox.

“You can’t rescue me,” said Valentino. “I can’t escape. But if you stay here, we could have our second chance.”

Vox’s heart ached. “Except you aren’t real and I would always know that. And if I take your offer, that means I give up on both of them.” Vox lifted his head a little higher. “I made a promise not to do that again. I have to fight for them. Both of them.”

“You’ll fail,” Valentino said sadly. “You can’t save both of them.”

“You can’t save either of them,” Alastor corrected. “All three of you will perish.”

“Probably,” said Vox as he glanced at the scar on his wrist that had never quite healed. He could barely make out the letters there. “But I love them enough to try anyway.”

He turned as Valentino and Alastor lurched towards him, and he sprinted towards the rubble.

Alastor kept up a steady wave of static as he pressed his head against Vox's screen, one hand at his ports as he matched Vox's frequency.

It had been a shock to find Vox's unconscious shell slumped unceremoniously over the floor - or whatever could be considered a floor in Purgatory.

He had traced Vox's frequency a while ago - he'd lost track of how long it had been since then - and the *relief* he had felt at seeing his lover's body intact had been overwhelming.

But Vox hadn't woken up and Alastor couldn't figure out how to snap him out of whatever Purgatory was putting him through.

So he stayed with Vox's limp body, using static and frequencies to garner a response from Vox - *any* response, but Vox showed no signs of waking up and Alastor's hope began to wane.

What if Vox *never* woke up? What if he was trapped in the Despair trial? What if it wasn't a trial at all? What if Vox had chosen the false world of happiness that Purgatory had offered? He had been so low and upset...

Vox's screen brightened and he blinked groggily at Alastor.

Alastor choked out a sob.

He threw his arms around Vox and buried his face into his shoulder, but his heart clenched with fear as Vox sat up and shoved him backwards with narrowed eyes.

"Prove you're real," Vox demanded.

Alastor hesitated before setting his hands gently either side of Vox's screen and leaning their heads together as he pulsed tender, anguished, relieved static between them both. His frequency nestled into Vox's and he stroked his thumb reverently over Vox's glass.

"Fuck," Vox choked out as he seated Alastor in his lap and kissed him heatedly.

Alastor inhaled sharply before pushing Vox onto his back and kissing back with equal desperation as he melted against his lover, and Vox's fingers tangled into his hair, the others splaying protectively over his back as their frequencies clashed and harmonised frantically, static dancing over their skin until they couldn't tell what belonged to who.

"I'm sorry," Vox whimpered in between kisses. "I should never have given up on you."

"You didn't," Alastor whispered hurriedly as he wrapped his thighs around Vox's hips. "I shouldn't have started such a pointless fight. We were both upset and tired and I shouldn't have made you feel so guilty."

"You had every right to be mad at me," Vox murmured as he held Alastor closer. "I promised we'd finish this together. I nearly broke that promise."

"You thought you were saving me," Alastor protested before he nipped Vox's lip.

"Doesn't matter. I shouldn't have put you in that position. I should have tried harder."

"I'm so exhausted," Alastor whimpered as he clutched at his lover. His very alive, very *whole* lover. "Vox, I want to go home."

"Me too, sweetheart," Vox whispered as he clung tightly to Alastor. "Just... lie on me for a few more minutes. I want to feel you against me. It's been *weeks* since I last saw you. The real you."

“Weeks?” Alastor breathed before he let Vox take his weight. He nuzzled into his neck and Vox let out a shaky breath as he wrapped his arms around Alastor.

“I love you,” Vox said, a crack in his voice. “I love you so fucking much, Al.”

Alastor nuzzled deeper into Vox’s neck, splaying a hand over his chest. “I watched Roo kill you,” he confessed.

Vox blinked. “That’s why you…” He trailed off and gritted his teeth. “I’m right here. I’m right here and I’m never leaving you again,” Vox hissed.

Alastor trembled, suddenly overwhelmed by relief and grief and traumatic memories. “Prove it.”

Vox wasted no time in rolling them over and pushing Alastor onto his back. He kissed his lover greedily, nipping and sucking as he slotted their fingers together and pinned Alastor’s hands either side of his head.

Vox pulled back with a gasp. “Can I touch you?” he whispered.

“Yes,” Alastor breathed and Vox unbuttoned his waistcoat and shirt and gently grasped his waist before reverently pressing his lips to Alastor’s stomach. Vox shuddered a little and squeezed his eyes shut and Alastor’s gaze softened as he stroked an antenna.

Vox worked his way slowly over Alastor’s stomach and up to his chest, littering Alastor’s skin with devoted kisses. He pressed his lips to Alastor’s nipple and Alastor touched the ports at the back of his head, sending an encouraging burst of static down them.

“Shit,” Vox whimpered before he buried his face into Alastor’s fluffy chest and began to cry.

Alastor's ears straightened in alarm and he gathered Vox into his arms and nuzzled his antennae.

"I forgot how *warm* you are," Vox sobbed. "I forgot how much you love me."

Alastor blinked before his smile widened. "Now, how could you ever forget a thing like that?"

"You were so cold in my trial," Vox whispered as he settled atop Alastor and circled a finger around his nipple. "Kept pushing me away. Kept telling me that you needed space, that you didn't trust me."

Alastor grimaced. "Vox-"

"You said I betrayed you," Vox continued quietly as he snaked an arm around Alastor. "You told me I'd changed and that I'd become the man you hated all those years ago-"

"*Never*," Alastor growled as he clutched at Vox. "I *never* hated you. I felt a lot of things for you when we were fighting, but hate wasn't one of them."

Vox pushed his face deeper into Alastor's chest before he let out a watery huff. "You cut me out of your life and after I crashed, you suddenly wanted me back in it, and I was so *confused* because everything felt wrong and you were so... mechanical and your frequency didn't match your actions and-" He curled his fingers into Alastor's back. "I missed you. I missed your warmth and gentleness. I missed the way you hold me, the way you talk to me." He raised his glassy gaze to Alastor.

"Tell me you love me," he whispered. "Please?"

Alastor caught the bottom of Vox's screen between his thumb and forefinger. "I love you," he said firmly. "I've loved you for years and I'll never stop. No matter what happens here, no matter what we face, I will *always* love you, Vox."

Vox pressed another doting kiss to Alastor's chest, brows scrunched in concentration, and Alastor let his hands wander. He touched Vox's damaged antennae, swallowing thickly, before letting his fingers graze his lover's neck. Vox looked at him curiously and Alastor brushed his thumb over his lips and where they merged with his screen. He smoothed his palms over Vox's shoulders, squeezing tightly, and he suddenly felt choked.

Vox was *alive* and in his arms in one piece.

His smile wobbled and Vox's eyes widened before he crawled up Alastor's body and peppered his face in sweet kisses.

"Hey, I'm here," Vox soothed.

"I watched you die in pain and I did *nothing*," Alastor managed.

"None of that," Vox murmured as he snuggled against Alastor. "It wasn't real. You *found* me, Alastor. You found me and brought me home."

"We're not home yet," muttered Alastor, and Vox chuckled.

"*You* are my home, Al. The place doesn't matter. All that matters is that you're there."

Alastor brushed his fingers up and down Vox's screen edge as they gazed adoringly at one another.

"I really am sorry," Vox said after a few moments. "For scaring you. For giving up on you, on *us*. I... I didn't mean-"

“Hush,” Alastor said. “I forgive you. I’ll always forgive you, my dear. I’m sorry for starting a fight when you were already going through so much.”

“You had every right to be upset,” Vox murmured before he offered Alastor a half-hearted smile. “Just don’t ‘rip out my tongue’ for apologising again.”

Alastor frowned in confusion and Vox’s smile faded.

“Remember?” Vox said. “When you told me you’d-” He cut himself off and blinked. “...Perhaps that wasn’t you.”

“That... isn’t something I’d say to you knowing you were upset,” Alastor said slowly.

“Wait, when did we separate?” Vox asked curiously. “Because I thought it was after I saved Val. Well. Fake Val, I guess.”

Alastor blinked. “You didn’t save Valentino. We couldn’t open the door.”

Vox raised an eyebrow. “Huh. What about Charlie? Do you remember finding her slumped on the floor?”

Alastor flicked an ear. “*You* saw her. And she was running towards us before those roots wrapped around her and snatched her away again.”

They stared at each other.

“We got separated early on,” Vox said, surprised. “Do you remember the talk with Purgatory in Charlie’s body?”

“Yes,” Alastor said. “We had an argument shortly after. I made you promise me to never give up because I told you I’d always find my way back to you. We didn’t argue for long.”

Vox’s gaze softened and a smile touched his lips. Alastor cocked his head in query.

“That isn’t how our argument went for me,” Vox said softly. “You were so *angry*. You wouldn’t talk to me. Wouldn’t let me touch you at all. You were... cold. I thought I’d broken us. You were like that for *weeks*, even after we supposedly escaped Purgatory.”

Alastor’s eyes widened and he cupped Vox’s screen with one hand. “Why would I-? Vox, I would *never* treat you like that. I can’t stay angry at you - especially when I know you were trying to *save* me. And I know how important touch is for you; I would never withhold that.” His ears lowered a fraction. “I may *struggle* with it sometimes, but I will always try to give you what you need.”

Vox delicately rested the bottom of his screen on Alastor’s chest, gazing at him with a gooey smile. “Both of our Despair trials were about losing one another,” he said, amused.

Alastor relaxed beneath his lover, trailing a finger down an antenna. “In case you haven’t noticed, you’re rather important to me.”

“You’re important to me too, darling,” Vox sighed before he nuzzled one of Alastor’s nipples and pressed a gentle kiss to it.

Alastor’s eyes slipped shut as he held Vox and the Television Demon lapped lazily at the nub before taking it into his mouth and rolling his tongue over it.

“Vox...”

“Hush. Let me worship you.”

Alastor opened his eyes and watched as Vox sucked and teased at his nipple before pinching the other one and grazing his lips down Alastor's chest to his stomach as he slipped an arm beneath his back. He nuzzled the trail of soft red fur that led into his trousers and he kissed the area slowly, gaze flicking up to meet Alastor's as he did so.

"You are quite beautiful, my love," Alastor whispered as he pinched Vox's damaged antenna and pulsed affectionate static into it.

Vox peppered kisses over his hip bones before Alastor hooked a finger beneath his bow tie and coaxed him up his body once more. Vox settled on top of him and Alastor stole a kiss from his lips, losing himself in the taste of Vox's tongue and the warmth of his mouth and the way Vox's arms snaked around him possessively.

They kissed slowly, deeply, basking in their harmonised frequencies and the weight of one another's bodies, and when Vox lapped desperately into his mouth, Alastor sucked his tongue and nipped his lip, letting Vox see his own neediness.

Vox cupped his cheek and kissed him harder and Alastor made a noise of approval as he slid his hands beneath Vox's many layers and raked his fingers over his back and ports. Vox arched into him and Alastor thrust his fingers deep into the ports, clutching at them and relishing Vox's soft moan.

"Tell me you want me," begged Vox.

"I want you," Alastor growled before demanding another kiss from his lover. "I need you. I love you. I'll *always* want you, Vox. I'll never leave you. *Never.*"

"Again," Vox whispered. "Tell me again."

Alastor's heart ached and he clutched at Vox, holding him tightly to his body as he massaged Vox's ports.

“I want you. I *need* you. Touch me and kiss me and don’t let go.”

Vox shivered and kissed him frantically, hands roaming greedily over Alastor’s body, riding over every rise and fall, over every inch of skin and fur on Alastor’s exposed torso. He buried his fingers in the tuft of fur at Alastor’s chest and Alastor pushed into his touch with an encouraging whine as he hooked his legs around Vox’s hips and humped the tent in his trousers.

Vox made a strained sound and reached down to free Alastor’s aching dick, but Alastor’s Fear trial flashed in his mind and he shook his head quickly.

Vox immediately stopped and weaved his fingers through Alastor’s hair instead, kissing him hard as he let Alastor grind against him.

“I’m sorry,” Alastor breathed into his mouth and Vox made a dismissive noise at the back of his throat and slid their tongues together.

Vox was so *attentive*. He read Alastor’s body language with ease and adapted quickly to his wants and *why was this all so easy with Vox?* Alastor smiled against Vox’s mouth and relaxed as Vox ground against him, matching his rhythm.

“Missed this,” Vox whimpered, splaying a hand over Alastor’s lower back to support him. “Missed you taking care of me like this.”

“Where do you want me to touch you, my love?” Alastor whispered. “Tell me what you need.”

“My vents,” Vox begged. “Put your fingers in my vents.”

Alastor unbuttoned Vox’s waistcoat and shirt slowly before tugging him down until their stomachs were flush, until hot skin met hot skin, and he slid his fingers into Vox’s vents,

teasing at them, thrusting in and out, brushing wires and carefully allowing his claws to elongate as he held Vox by his vents.

“Fuck,” Vox hissed. “Don’t stop. I need you. I need this. I need...”

“Tell me,” Alastor murmured into Vox’s mouth. “Tell me what you need.”

Vox trembled. “I need you to tell me that we’re going to be okay. That we’re going to get back and we’re going to be happy and we aren’t going to *die* here.”

Alastor stiffened in surprise and Vox looked at him with tears in his eyes.

“I’m so fucking tired,” Vox said.

Alastor stared before he tugged Vox flush against him and kissed him roughly.

“We’re going to be okay,” Alastor growled. “We aren’t going to die here. We’re going to rescue Charlie, get back home, and we’re going to be happy because we’ve *earned it*.”

“I’m afraid,” Vox confessed quietly as he leaned their heads together.

Alastor curled a hand around the back of Vox’s neck. “So am I.”

They stilled, Alastor’s legs still wrapped around Vox’s hips and their hard dicks trapped beneath clothing yet nestled against one another comfortably. Alastor relished the feeling of Vox’s warm body lying flat against his and he curled his fingers inside his lover’s vents, humming when Vox fisted his hair and tightened his grip on his back.

He didn't want to move. He wanted to stay like this forever, tangled around Vox's body, basking in his heat and needy arousal, listening to the soft whir of his fans and the buzzing of his components and his steady breaths. He inhaled Vox's addictive scent and deliberately dug his fingers deep into his vents, coaxing a delicious whine out of his lover. He adored the noises Vox made for him.

Vox drew Alastor's lower lip between his teeth, sucking and nipping until it swelled and every so often, Alastor rutted against Vox's cock, unhurried and relaxed and Vox hummed with enjoyment each time, never pushing for more, never grinding against Alastor in return, merely enjoying the simple pressure and friction Alastor's movements brought.

He lapped inside Alastor's mouth messily, tongues sliding together before Vox thoroughly claimed his mouth, ruining his lips and sucking his tongue and tasting every inch of Alastor as he pulled his hair gently.

Alastor panted into Vox's mouth, letting himself be wrecked as he continued his lazy thrusting and he wrapped himself tighter around Vox, fingers buried inside his vents as his other hand gripped the back of Vox's neck.

He had never been this desperate for anyone before. He had never *craved* someone like this before.

His pleasure crept up on him slowly, building and building until his stomach was filled with pressure and his breaths were heavy and his heart thumped loudly in his chest for the man above him.

"Come for me, Al," Vox whispered against his swollen lips. "Relax. I've got you."

He rutted into Vox again, slow and deep, and a breathy noise left him at the pleasurable friction, which Vox swallowed greedily. He humped Vox again and clenched his legs around his hips, and Vox sucked at his bruised lips. "That's it, darling. Come for me. Let me hear that lovely voice of yours."

Another breathy moan left Alastor as he rutted against Vox unashamedly. His lips were sore and his cock ached and he was *exhausted* but Vox was warm and pliant and he held Alastor like he was the most precious thing in the entire universe, and Vox was *alive*.

He tossed his head back as a moan tumbled from his lips, the pressure in his belly building, and Vox latched onto his throat, biting and sucking and kissing.

Suddenly, it was too much and Alastor came with a loud whine, clutching desperately at Vox.

“That’s it,” purred Vox. “Good boy. Such a beautiful voice. So sweet. So needy. And all for me.”

Alastor nodded and bared his neck further in invitation and Vox was quick to take the offer. His fingers left Vox’s vents to spread over his ass in encouragement and Vox’s breath hitched before he humped Alastor’s soft cock in earnest.

“I’m yours,” Alastor whispered as his eyes slipped shut. “I want you, Vox. I need you. I need you to hold me and fight for me and love me. I need you to feel safe with me. I need you to know that I will *always* find my way back to you, that I will always fight for you, that I will *never* stop loving you.”

Vox suddenly shifted, dragging Alastor upright and seating him in his lap, and Alastor wrapped his legs around Vox’s waist once more and let his head tip back as Vox ground into him, still tugging his hair, still clutching his back. Alastor squeezed the back of Vox’s neck and raked his nails lightly down Vox’s ports, and Vox groaned unabashedly into his throat.

“Make me feel so good,” Vox breathed before he nipped Alastor’s neck. “Make me feel wanted and adored.”

“Would you like me to help you?” Alastor asked quietly, hand leaving Vox’s back to skate down his chest and stomach, lower, lower...

“Not if you aren’t ready,” Vox said firmly.

“I want to,” Alastor whispered before he swiftly opened Vox’s trousers and slipped his hand inside.

Vox arched into his touch and Alastor squeezed his neck a little tighter until Vox cursed.

He stroked Vox with a delicate brush of his fingertips before curling his fist around him and jerking him roughly, then releasing him to brush his thumb teasingly over his weeping head, and Vox whined and panted and rutted against the front of Alastor’s trousers.

“Tease,” Vox mumbled into his neck.

“You’re enjoying it,” Alastor purred as Vox seated him more comfortably in his lap.

Vox dipped down to suck a nipple and Alastor squeezed his neck and cock at the same time until Vox gasped and surged upwards to claim Alastor’s mouth again, hot and desperate.

He pumped Vox’s dick a few times before sliding his palm beneath his balls and toying with them, rolling them between his fingers before giving them a sharp squeeze and Vox jerked and humped Alastor’s hand.

“Good man,” Alastor praised as he closed his fingers around Vox’s dick and kept his hand still. “Grind your hips.”

Vox thrust into Alastor’s hand desperately, making a pleased sound when Alastor squeezed his neck again.

Alastor dropped his gaze to Vox’s glowing, weeping cock and he pumped it slowly, smirking when Vox matched his rhythm. So *responsive*...

“Moan for me, my love,” Alastor said softly. “Don’t hold back. I want to hear you.”

Vox gasped and whined and whimpered needily before he released Alastor’s hair in favour of gripping one of the impressive antlers that had grown from Alastor’s head without his knowledge. Vox tugged the antler and a primitive instinct stirred inside Alastor.

“Mine,” growled Alastor as he claimed Vox’s lips. “You’re *mine*. No one else can have you.”

Vox’s eyes flew open as he looked at Alastor, caught off guard. Then, he released Alastor’s antler in favour of placing his hand around the one Alastor was pumping him with.

Alastor growled again and snatched Vox’s hand away from his dick, forcing it around his antler again.

“Did I say you could touch yourself?” Alastor hissed, gripping Vox’s neck tighter as he squeezed the base of his dick.

Vox stared at him with wide eyes, chest heaving. “*Fuck*, Alastor,” he panted, excitement shining in his gaze. Mischievousness flashed behind his eyes and he released Alastor’s antler again and attempted to touch himself once more, and Alastor pinned him on his back, wrists either side of his head as something animalistic and *thrilling* pooled in his stomach at Vox’s defiance.

Vox stared up at him eagerly, pupils shaped like hearts.

“One hand on my antler, the other on my back,” Alastor said lowly. “Do *not* touch yourself or there will be consequences.”

“What sort of consequences?” Vox purred as he trailed a finger down Alastor’s ear disobediently.

Alastor captured his wrist once more. “Consequences like you having to hump my leg like a *dog* if you want any hope of release,” Alastor warned

Vox’s eyes flashed with intrigue before he followed Alastor’s orders.

Alastor restarted his ministrations, pumping Vox slowly and teasing at his weeping head before speeding up the pace.

Vox tugged his antler sharply and Alastor growled in warning as something feral stirred in his gut. Vox grinned lazily at him and he tightened his grip on the antler before jerking it again.

Alastor curled his hand around Vox’s throat, placing a little pressure upon it. Vox watched him intensely before tugging his antler again and Alastor's grip on his throat tightened a fraction.

He jerked Vox faster and stiffened when his lover’s hand closed around his once more.

Vox smirked up at him defiantly.

Alastor bit back a grin and narrowed his eyes dangerously. “Disobedient little wretch,” he growled. He snatched Vox’s wrists and pinned them either side of his head before nudging his thigh carefully against Vox’s dick.

“Hump my thigh, like the needy little *mutt* you are,” Alastor hissed.

Vox wasted no time in grinding against Alastor’s thigh, heated gaze never leaving Alastor’s face.

He was extraordinarily handsome, thought Alastor privately.

He was surprised when Vox arched and came over his thigh with a moan.

When Vox caught his breath, he grinned up at Alastor. “You are so fucking hot.”

Alastor stroked the edge of Vox’s screen gently. “Was that... alright?”

Vox huffed a laugh. “Yes. Yes, Alastor, that was amazing. Damn, I love it when you take charge.”

Alastor felt his tail attempting to wiggle beneath his trousers. He stretched over Vox delicately, humming when Vox tucked him into his body, rubbing his back soothingly.

Guilt niggled at Alastor’s chest. “I’m sorry I couldn’t-”

“Stop,” Vox interrupted gently. “You were perfect. The fact that you even let me hold you after everything you’ve been through is a miracle.”

“I feel safe with you,” Alastor murmured with a frown. “Why can’t I just... let you have me? You’ve had me before.”

“For the same reason I need to keep touching you, even though I know you won’t abandon me,” Vox said quietly. “Those scars will always be there. We can’t magically heal them. They’ll always ache. They’ll always remind us what we suffered through. But that doesn’t mean we should stop trying to ease the pain.” Vox smiled warmly at Alastor. “*You* ease my pain. Being around you helps. The abandonment issues will always be there, but being with you pushes them into the background.”

Alastor blinked as the epiphany struck him. “Some days will be better than others,” he murmured. “Sometimes I’ll be able to give myself to you and sometimes I won’t.”

Vox nodded and petted his ear affectionately. “Some days I’ll be satisfied merely talking to you, some days I’ll need you to hold me and reassure me that we’re okay.”

“I can do that,” Alastor whispered, spreading his fingers over Vox’s heart.

Vox laid his hand atop Alastor’s. “I know. Just as I know it’s going to get messy and complicated some days when we’re both feeling low, when we’re both suffering. But we’ll work it out. We always do. Being with you is worth it.”

Alastor melted into Vox’s body. Vox *understood*. Vox loved him enough to be patient, to take care of him when he was struggling with memories, to respect his boundaries when he needed space.

It was okay if they never fully healed from their trauma, if the memories still hurt sometimes, because they each had someone who understood, someone who would help them through the bad days and love them just as much as during the good days.

It was okay to ask for *help*.

They would, as Vox said, ‘figure it out together’.

Perhaps these trials had been useful in a way. Perhaps they had helped them to not only understand one another better, but to understand themselves better.

A bell tolled and a set of gates appeared beside them, each pillar bearing six green lights.

They lay tangled together for a few minutes, comfortable and happy, before Alastor rolled his head on Vox’s chest and frowned at the open gates.

“No more trials,” he whispered.

“No more trials,” Vox agreed nervously.

They held each other a fraction tighter before slowly climbing to their feet. Alastor grimaced at the stickiness in his trousers and on his thigh as Vox zipped himself up and snickered at his expression.

“Consider it a mark of my devotion to you,” Vox teased and Alastor flicked his antenna before using one of the tails of Vox’s coat to dry the mess from his thigh. Vox laughed then made a noise of protest when Alastor stared him dead in the eye and dried the mess inside his trousers with Vox’s tail too.

“Merely returning the favour,” Alastor said sweetly as he released Vox’s coat.

Vox barked out a laugh and dragged Alastor into his side before they headed towards the gates.

They paused as words etched themselves slowly into the stone pillar to the left of the gates.

Please, stop.

Alastor and Vox shared a glance before stepping through the gates.

The gates crumbled behind them and they froze at the sight of a very traumatised-looking Vaggie.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Suicidal thoughts in the first section, gore

Bet you didn't see Vaggie coming ;)

Chapter 66: Guardian Angels And Fallen Heroes

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Vaggie?” Alastor asked in surprise.

The angel flinched and took a step backwards, then another. She was trembling ever-so-slightly.

“You’re dead,” she muttered, seemingly to herself. “You aren’t real. None of this is real.”

Alastor blinked and glanced at Vox, who stared back at him with wide eyes.

“We’re real,” Alastor said firmly. “This is real, Vaggie.”

Vaggie glowered at them, fingers flexing in search of a spear she didn’t have. “You’re another trick. Another illusion. Part of my Fear trial.”

Alastor’s ears stood upright as charge bounced between Vox’s antennae.

“The trials are over,” Vox said gently. “Purgatory - its programming, at least - is gone.”

“Liar,” growled Vaggie. “I won’t be fooled that easily. I don’t know *why* you’d be part of my trial-”

“We aren’t,” said Alastor impatiently as he looked around. “We’ve beaten the final trial. Purgatory’s programming is complete. The trials are over.”

“Unless they lied,” Vox whispered. “This might not be the real Vaggie. Maybe Purgatory’s still running.” Alastor glanced at him with a grim expression and nodded slowly.

“I... I’m real,” Vaggie said, eyes growing wide before she looked around the darkness and caught sight of the gates crumbling behind them. Her breath hitched as reality set in. “You’re *alive*? You’ve been gone for twenty months. We all thought you were dead.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Alastor said with a false grin. “These trials take time, unfortunately.”

“You’ve been fighting all this time?” Vaggie whispered. “Fighting for... for Charlie?”

“That was the plan,” Vox reminded.

“That *was* the plan,” Alastor agreed with a scowl. “Why are you here? Where’s Lucifer and his army of Archangels?”

Vaggie swallowed. “They won’t help. They say Charlie’s already dead. They say that no sinner can beat Purgatory so there’s no chance of The Root breaking free. And then... then they let slip that they lost Lilith to her. Lucifer... Lucifer lost his *shit*. He nearly started an all-out war with Heaven. He’s frantic. When you didn’t come back, Lucifer tried everything to get Charlie back, but Purgatory’s defences have her locked up tight and The Root isn’t letting go. Lucifer was going to start the trials on his own but if she got hold of him too... Well, there’d be no stopping her if she escaped. I started the trials and told him to stand by, but...”

She trailed off and swallowed thickly, squeezing her eyes shut. “I... I can’t do it. I can’t beat them. I barely made it through the first one.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “How did you...?”

“With blood, sweat, and tears,” said Vox humourlessly before he awkwardly squeezed her shoulder, making her jump. “Look, Purgatory said it basically shuts down once someone completes the trials. For anyone still competing, the trials end, which is probably why you’re here with us. That means there’s nothing left between us and Charlie apart from Roo.”

Alastor looked around again, ears flicking and Vox watched him carefully.

“What can you hear?” Vox asked, warily.

“Footsteps,” Alastor murmured. “Muffled voices. Other souls. They’re... lost. Afraid. Wandering blindly through the darkness.”

Vox’s brows pinched together thoughtfully before he remembered the final part of his Despair trial. “The people who chose the lie,” he whispered. “The souls that took Purgatory’s offer of living in a false world. They’ve been kicked out.”

Alastor narrowed his eyes, peering through the void as his ears twitched this way and that, listening, *searching*.

Vox knew exactly what he was searching for. He shifted his weight restlessly before licking his lips. “Val?”

Alastor hesitated then shook his head.

Vox’s stomach sank.

“We’ll find him,” Alastor muttered. “He might be in a different part of Purgatory.”

“Why the fuck do you care about Valentino?” Vaggie asked, wrinkling her nose as she glanced at Vox. “Didn’t he cut you up into tiny pieces?”

“It’s... complicated,” said Vox before rolling his shoulders and steeling himself. “Come on. Let’s find Charlie.”

The tension in his spine eased a little when Alastor grazed his fingers over his lower back. They would find Valentino and they would bring him home.

The silence of the void was unnerving, the grief-stricken wails and quiet sobbing of lost souls doubly so.

And then the whispers started, like the hissing of snakes and the soft whistle of a gentle wind, and slowly, ever-so-slowly, the voices died away one by one, the footsteps growing more distant, quieter and quieter until they stopped all together.

Vaggie shuffled a little closer to both Overlords, seemingly without realising it.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

Alastor’s ears swivelled. “She’s feeding.”

Vox’s blood ran cold.

“What do you mean?” Vaggie asked quietly and Vox’s mouth drew into a thin line.

“Keep walking,” he muttered. “And don’t listen to anything she says.”

“What are you-?” Vaggie suddenly fell quiet, eyes growing wide as she froze and shivered. Her nails dug into her thigh and her breaths grew quicker and fear filled her gaze before she gasped and clutched at her hair. “No, stop! You’re lying!” Tears dripped freely down her cheeks as she sank to her knees. “No, she’s not!” she snarled before choking off into a sob.

“She’s dead,” Vaggie wailed as her fingers pressed into her scalp and her body doubled over with despair. “She’s gone!” Agonised cries tore from her throat and Vox sat beside her, rubbing her back.

“She isn’t,” Vox said quietly. “Roo’s messing with you. Feeding off you. You’ve got to ignore her. Get up, Vaggie. Keep walking. Charlie’s waiting for us.”

Another pained cry tumbled from Vaggie’s lips. “She’s *dead*! I saw it! She *showed* me!”

“Get up,” Alastor said coolly. “This isn’t helping Charlie. Remember, Roo is no longer bound by Purgatory’s chains. She is stronger than she was before and we’re in *her* domain. She’s trying to strengthen herself before she escapes, before she descends into Hell. She needs someone to open the door for her.”

Vaggie looked up at him through red-rimmed eyes before instinctively leaning into Vox’s reassuring embrace. He smiled at her and rubbed her back before pulling her to her feet.

“Charlie’s strong,” Vox whispered. “Ignore Roo. She’s hungry.”

Vaggie wiped her eyes on her sleeve before nodding and Vox found himself keeping an arm around her as he urged her forwards.

After a few moments, he felt cold anguish and fear and *evil* slowly seep into his bones like a rising tide, threatening to swallow him, drag him into the murky depths of grief, and he sought out Alastor’s hand as his breaths grew deeper against the pressure threatening to crush his ribs.

Then he heard a familiar breathy voice at the back of his mind, soft and gentle and *smiling*.

“Valentino is *dead*. You’re too late.”

Vox squeezed Alastor's hand urgently and Alastor turned to him as they walked, keeping a close eye on him.

"Let me show you," Roo whispered and images flashed up in Vox's mind, images of Valentino failing his *Lust* trial, of falling into a state of anguish, of picking up a replica of one of his favourite guns, of wedging the muzzle beneath his chin-

Vox flinched at the sharp *bang*.

There was the smell of blood and gunpowder, followed by an image of Valentino's grey corpse floating aimlessly through the void amidst a sea of other corpses who had also failed the trials.

"His blood is on your hands," purred Roo inside his head. "You shouldn't have let him walk through those gates alone. You sealed his fate."

They couldn't have continued the trials if Valentino *hadn't* walked through the gates. Still the conjured image of Valentino's lifeless body made Vox feel nauseous. He squeezed Alastor's hand again and Alastor spread a protective hand over his back.

"It isn't real," Alastor murmured. "Whatever she's showing you, she's lying."

"Soon, Alastor will join him," Roo breathed, sounding amused. "I'll make sure of it. He's still under my control. I'm going to hurt him for fun. I'm going to make you watch him suffer. I'm going to make his death slow and unpleasant and you'll beg and plead for mercy, and I'll laugh and watch him *bleed*."

Alastor's bloodied, *mangled* corpse appeared beside Valentino's, face frozen in an expression of agony and skin torn and limbs broken and blood dripping from his severed ears-

“Fuck,” gasped Vox, squeezing his eyes shut and panicking when he could still see the image behind his digital eyelids.

His eyes flew open again. “Alastor,” he begged as the stench of rotting flesh and death filled his sensors, and Alastor was suddenly *there*, holding his screen and pulsing comforting static between them and stroking his antennae and his lips, reassuring him, *grounding* him.

“It isn’t real. Whatever she’s making you see and feel, it isn’t real,” Alastor whispered as he grabbed Vox’s hand and placed it against his chest so Vox could feel the steady beat of his heart beneath his palm.

“It *will* be real soon enough,” Roo purred and Vox’s vision glitched; the Alastor in front of him becoming the mutilated corpse he had just been forced to imagine, and Vox squeezed his eyes shut again with a soft whine, frustrated when the image remained frozen in his mind.

He released Vaggie in favour of clutching Alastor’s shirt. “Al, I can’t breathe. She’s using you, showing me your dead body, saying she’s going to make you *bleed*...”

There was gentle pressure at the top of Vox’s screen as Alastor leaned their heads together, and a frequency intertwined with his as Alastor snaked an arm around his waist and stroked the edge of his screen.

“I’m here,” Alastor whispered. “I’m right here beside you.”

Vox focused on Alastor’s frequency and the weight of his arm around his waist. After a moment, he opened his eyes and found Alastor smiling softly at him, just for him.

He smiled gratefully and smoothed his palm over Alastor’s cheek before they parted again and the cold anguish threatening to drown Vox faded away.

Vaggie looked between them with wide eyes and Alastor smiled sharply at her. “Moving on,” he said, a warning in his tone.

She remained graciously quiet and Vox placed a hand at her back, ensuring she didn't fall behind.

Alastor's ears twitched agitatedly before lowering and his smile pulled into a snarl the further they walked. Vox subtly slipped a hand into his and Alastor squeezed at it tightly, grounding himself against whatever Roo was telling him.

Again, Vaggie didn't comment upon their affection for one another and Vox kept his eyes on Alastor, watching carefully for any signs of distress.

"Charlie!" Vaggie said suddenly and Vox flicked his gaze around the empty void and dragged her backwards, away from the thick, thorny root slithering towards her.

"Let me go!" she snarled.

"There's nothing there," Vox growled. "She's playing tricks on you." He nodded to the root protruding from the darkness a few feet away.

"She's right there," Vaggie protested. "She's hurt and-" She cut herself off as she looked again and blinked as her cheeks darkened.

Vox said nothing and pushed them all forwards, pulling Alastor against his side when the Radio Demon squeezed his eyes shut and let out a quiet curse.

Vaggie put a hand out and pointed at the root tip mere inches from Vox's feet. Vox's mouth drew into a thin line as they stepped around it, and as they trudged on, there were more roots, growing thicker and thicker with sharper thorns, some writhing and some slithering and some branching across the ground, growing wider and wider.

Alastor slowed, looking around the branches nervously. His fingers curled into the back of Vox's coat and he planted his feet firmly.

Vox and Vaggie looked at him curiously and Alastor's eyes grew wider and wider as he looked around the roots that were creeping closer. He took a step backwards, pulling Vox with him.

"Al, whatever you're seeing, it isn't real," Vox said gently.

Alastor shook his head and shot Vox a haunted gaze. "You're real this time," he said, obscurely.

With a frown, Vox secured his grip on Alastor and nodded. "Yeah, I'm real."

Alastor glanced around the roots, panicked and his ears twitched and flicked, on high alert.

"I can't do this again," Alastor whispered. "I can't- I won't be able to focus. All I'll see is you being *impaled* by that creature's antlers and-" His breaths came quicker as he stared at Vox, panicked. "I can't do this."

The epiphany hit and Vox's gaze softened. "I'm not going to die, sweetheart. We've come too far to lose each other now. What you went through in that last trial... It was made specifically to *break* you. Well, I'm not planning on dying, I'm not planning on breaking the heart of the man I love. We're going to get our happy ending, Al. We're so close. One final hurdle. We've already done the impossible."

Alastor calmed and let himself be tugged into Vox's side once more as they pressed onwards.

"Love?" echoed Vaggie after a little while.

Alastor tensed, baring his teeth, an acidic barb on the tip of his tongue, ready to defend Vox and their relationship.

“Yeah,” Vox said simply and Alastor deflated.

“Oh,” said Vaggie with a small frown. “I thought you two were just fucking.”

“We do that too sometimes,” Vox hummed and Vaggie wrinkled her nose.

“So... You two really have forgiven each other for all the crap you’ve done to one another? It’s not just a business partnership or a rivals-with-benefits kind of thing?”

“You don’t see us as the romantic type?” Alastor drawled.

“Vox, maybe,” Vaggie huffed. “You? I assumed your idea of a perfect date was one you could *eat*.”

Alastor scowled and Vox bit back a laugh. “You know... Al’s quite the gentleman. Takes me dancing by the canal, invites me to tea with his friends, takes me to cafés where we sit all day in the window, just talking and watching the world go by... He’s even promised to take me on an aquarium date.” Vox sent Alastor a sly look and Alastor’s face *burned* as he kept his eyes forwards. “He really is a romantic deep down.”

Vaggie raised her eyebrows. “Really?” She frowned and looked away thoughtfully. “It’s rare for sinners to fall in love like that. Hellborn, sure. But two sinners? And Overlords at that? Huh.”

“And how common is it for an angel to fall in love with a Hellborn?” Alastor asked airily.

Vaggie fell quiet and Alastor hummed in triumph. For the afterlife of him, Vox couldn’t figure out what exactly it was that Alastor had *won*. He shook his head in amusement and

they weaved through the thick roots.

“Charlie!” Vaggie shouted and she started forwards before hesitating and looking desperately to Vox and Alastor.

Vox peered at a writhing, constricting mass of thorns in the distance, a pale hand and a red sleeve peeking out from inside.

He straightened. “I see her too.”

Vaggie darted towards the thick ball of roots, dodging any that snaked towards her ankles, and Vox and Alastor jogged after her, Alastor’s ears swivelling as Vox looked around them warily.

With a growl, Vaggie tore viciously at the roots until an unconscious, battered Charlie tumbled out of them. Vaggie made a choked noise as she cradled the princess to her chest.

“Charlie?” she whispered, and when there was no response, she narrowed her eyes and glanced sharply at Vox and Alastor. “How do we get out of here?”

“You don’t.”

Vox and Alastor bristled, ice settling in their veins as they whirled around with bared teeth, furious charge building in the air around them.

A pale woman stood before them, with long black hair, a wide brimmed hat, and a red leather jacket. She smiled at them with glossy black lips and if it weren’t for her breathy voice, she might have been mistaken for a corpse herself.

“I should thank you boys,” she said softly. “You freed me.” She didn’t approach them, merely stood, smiling, watching.

“The Archangels will fix that,” Vox growled.

She chuckled lightly. “No, I don’t think so.” She glanced behind them at where Vaggie was clutching Charlie close. “Congratulations. You achieved what you came here for. Now, if you’d just open the door for me, I’ll be on my way.”

“Open it yourself,” Vox goaded.

She smiled placidly. “Now, you know I can’t do that. I’ll tell you what, whoever finds and opens the door for me gets to live. Alternatively, I can kill you all and wait for Lucifer to return from his seventeenth bargaining session with Heaven and slip past before he can stop me. Waiting a few more days won’t bother me. I’ve already waited an eternity.”

“You don’t look that scary,” Vaggie snarled. “I bet Vox could fry you alive and Alastor could eat the remains of your sorry ass.”

Vox and Alastor sent her wide eyed stares.

Roo laughed pleasantly and crooked a finger at Vaggie.

Vaggie gasped as a thorny root wound around her middle, biting deep into her skin and dragging both her and Charlie’s limp frame within inches of Roo’s face.

“I think I’ll kill you first.”

“The fuck you will!” Lucifer roared as the entirety of Purgatory flashed with golden light. He hovered above Roo in his devilish form, flames roaring between his horns and wings flared impressively.

Roo's smile widened. "Looks like the whole family's here," she whispered to the pale-faced Vaggie. "Lucky me."

It was like watching a car crash in slow motion.

Lucifer soared towards Roo with a battlecry and Roo merely continued to smile as one of her roots snaked around Charlie's neck and yanked her out of Vaggie's hold. Blood trickled from Charlie's slack lips and still, she didn't move, but Lucifer froze mid-flight, chest heaving with white hot rage as the roots dangled Charlie between him and their master.

"Family reunions make me so emotional," said Roo softly as she pointed into the darkness and Lucifer glanced over his shoulder and made a wounded sound at the sight of his dead wife.

His wings missed a beat and he fell gracelessly to his hands and knees before heading towards Lilith then pausing when he remembered his daughter. He froze, looking between the two, gaze filled with grief.

"Your daughter is stronger than your wife, I'll give her that," Roo said as though she was discussing the weather. "The things I've done to her... To both of them..." She shook her head and chuckled. "It took me a while to break Charlotte. I'm impressed. It's a shame that daddy wasn't there to rescue her. How she trusted you, how she *begged* for you..." The roots curled tighter around Charlie's neck. "Do you think she'll ever forgive you?"

Lucifer's gaze grew glassy and he shook his head in anguish. "Let her go. *Please*. You've already taken my wife. Don't take my daughter too."

Roo tilted her head a fraction. "You stole my freedom. It's only fair that I steal your happiness." More roots slithered over Charlie's skin, tearing it and her already bedraggled clothing with sharp thorns, bruising her, making her bleed, and Lucifer fell to his knees, head bowed.

"Please! Take me instead! Let her go, I beg you!"

Roo's smile grew a fraction wider, a fraction *nastier*.

“No.”

The roots around them grew thicker and sharper, doubling in number and size and Vox glanced about them in alarm before sharing a wild look with Alastor. She was getting stronger, feeding off Lucifer's grief and fear and fury.

Vox's legs ran without him telling them to.

Alastor was right beside him.

They leapt upon her whilst she was distracted by Lucifer, clawing and discharging electricity and slashing antlers through her skin and deafening her with their combined frequencies, and it was enough of a shock for her to drop Charlie and for Vaggie to dart forwards and scoop her up.

“Run!” They heard Vaggie scream as they fought Roo and from the corner of Vox's eye, he caught sight of Lucifer throwing open a heavy door that looked very much like the one from his Despair trial.

Roots bit into his stomach and neck and arms and hurled him through the air, Alastor landing a fair distance away.

Closer to the door.

“Wretched creatures!” howled Roo as she advanced on them and Vox and Alastor shared another glance before scrambling to their feet and sprinting towards the door, Roo hot on their heels.

Alastor choked and Vox watched in horror as a black chain appeared at his throat and yanked him towards Roo, who wound the end of his chain around her arm, over and over, pulling him closer as huge roots raced towards him like Basilisks.

Vox launched for the chain, but he tripped over a large object and stumbled to his knees. He clambered to his feet, expecting to see a root, only to find that he'd actually stumbled over-

Valentino.

A very grey, very *still* Valentino.

With a gunshot wound beneath his chin.

Vox's breath left him and it was enough time for Roo to grab Alastor and for the chain to disappear once more.

"I said you were too late," Roo whispered.

Vox's gaze snapped to the struggling Alastor and he discharged a blast of electricity into Roo's *eyeballs*.

She screamed, hands flying to her face and Alastor gave a powerful kick to her legs before bounding towards the warded door, Vox galloping after him.

They tumbled through together and turned to slam the door shut, but Roo's fingers were already on the frame and she grinned maniacally at them as she pushed her head through the gap that was left.

Their feet slid on the rubble of the bookshop as they heaved at the door, pushing against her, and suddenly Lucifer was there with them, flapping his magnificent wings and shoving at the door with all of his might as she scrabbled and scratched madly at the frame. The angelic

sigils engraved into the door flashed and flickered with golden light and the door inched closed as the two Overlords and Archangel pushed at it, and Roo screamed and snarled and clawed at their faces as she was forced backwards.

Before the door clicked shut, a root smashed through Vox's screen and his grip faltered.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: suicide (Not Alastor/Vox). Gore.

I promise I will reply to your comments! Life has just been very busy at the moment and I thought you'd appreciate a chapter more than comment replies ;)

Chapter 67: A Brief Reprieve

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“It’s my fault.”

Alastor wrapped himself tighter around Vox’s back. “No, it isn’t,” he growled.

“It’s all my fault. If I had just *held on...*”

Alastor splayed a protective hand over Vox’s chest and another over his stomach.

“You were *blinded*, Vox. It isn’t your fault.”

“Then whose fucking fault is it?” Vox roared as he rounded on Alastor with his newly-repaired screen, courtesy of the Radio Demon.

Alastor lifted his head defiantly. “Not yours.”

Vox held his glare for a moment before putting his hands over his screen and sinking onto the hotel’s front deck and propping himself against the outside rail.

A thin root snaked up the wooden spindles of the rail, creeping towards Vox. Alastor bared his teeth and kicked at it, but the root didn’t break. He gritted his teeth and took Vox’s other side, pulling his lover against him and holding him close, uncaring if anyone saw.

“If I didn’t have such a *stupid* body-”

“I love your body,” Alastor said firmly. “If you didn’t have a television for a head, you wouldn’t be the man you are now and I wouldn’t have fallen in love with you so desperately.”

Vox looked at him tiredly. “I’ve doomed us. I let her escape.”

“You fought for Charlie,” Alastor said fiercely. “You fought for Valentino. You fought for *me*.” He scowled at the roots slowly branching their way through Hell, tearing up roads and winding around trees and creeping up buildings and diving into sewers and waterways. No part of Hell would be left untouched by Roo’s evil. “You didn’t *let* her do anything. You beat the impossible to save Charlie.”

“Val’s dead,” Vox muttered, frowning at his knees as he tugged them to his chest and wrapped his arms around himself. “I *failed*. I’ve made such a fucking mess.”

“No, you haven’t,” Alastor growled as he gripped the bottom of Vox’s screen and forced him to meet his gaze. “She could have torn off my antlers or broke Lucifer’s wings and it would have yielded the same result. She chose you because you were closer.”

“She chose me because my screen is a fucking *weakness*,” snarled Vox and the root slithered closer to his arm. “She chose me because she *knew* out of the three of us, I’d be the one to falter.” Electricity jumped between his antennae. “Just like how I faltered when she showed me Val. I could have broken your chain and I... I *froze up*.”

“She put Valentino’s *corpse* in your path,” Alastor said with a scowl. “You can be forgiven for being shocked in the moment.”

“I should have gone through with it,” Vox growled to himself as his claws bit into his own arms. “I should have fucking offed myself during that trial. Then *none* of this would have happened. Hell wouldn’t be under *her* rule.”

Fury and anguish bubbled up inside Alastor and he pinned Vox roughly against the rail with a snarl.

“Don’t you *dare* say that! Not after everything we’ve just been through! Not after I had to watch you get *obliterated* by that monster! Do you know how much pain I felt? Do you know how numb and *broken* I was?”

“You’d get over me,” spat Vox but there were tears threatening to roll down his face and his static prickled Alastor’s skin as the air grew heavy with charge. “And you wouldn’t have been forced into any of this *shit*. You wouldn’t have had to live through the worst possible Hell imaginable. You wouldn’t have to live the rest of your afterlife in fucking *misery*, and neither would anyone else!”

The root began winding around Vox’s arm and tiny thorns grew along it, biting into his skin.

Alastor stared at Vox hollowly as a tear spilled down his screen.

“I’m so sorry,” Vox whimpered before he broke down, shoulders wracked with sobs as he turned his face away from Alastor.

Alastor moulded himself into Vox, forcing his legs apart so he could lie between them and squeezing between his arms and wedging his face into Vox’s neck as he clutched at the Television Demon.

“You saved my life,” Alastor whispered after a while. “When I thought you’d died. When I thought I’d lost Charlie. When my ribs were broken and my body was beaten... My fingers were on the glass shard when I felt your frequency and it was...” Alastor closed his eyes and nuzzled into Vox’s neck. “It was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever felt.” He fisted the back of Vox’s shirt. “I wouldn’t have made it out without you, Vox. If you had perished back there, I wouldn’t have lasted much longer.”

Vox stilled before weaving his fingers into Alastor's hair and throwing an arm around his back. "...I didn't know."

"How could I ever 'get over you'?" Alastor asked quietly. "You saw what happened the last time we fought. The last time I tried to live without you. Five *decades* of heartbroken pining and emotional spiralling and loneliness. I was a mess without you. So don't you *dare* say that your death would have led to less misery for me. My 'worst Hell imaginable' is one without *you* in it."

Vox held Alastor tight to his chest and nuzzled an ear. "I just... I feel like... I wasn't strong enough to hold the door and now everyone is going to suffer for it. Heaven won't help us. In fact, us dying in pain and anger and misery at Roo's hands solves Hell's overpopulation problem quite nicely for them. They'll only intervene once she sets her sights on Heaven or Earth and by then... Well, it'll be too late for us."

Alastor's ears lowered and he snuggled deeper into Vox's warmth. "We would never have been able to hold her back," he whispered. "It took the strength of all the Archangels to restrain her last time. For all of our power and status as Overlords, that was a fight we could never hope to win. We got the best possible outcome. We saved Charlie and we got out, together."

Vox rubbed Alastor's back as he fell quiet. Finally, he pressed a doting kiss to Alastor's head. "I love you so damn much."

Alastor settled against him, snaking his hands beneath his shirt to feel hot skin. He needed to *touch*. Needed to feel that his lover was alive and whole.

"I love you too, my dear," he murmured as he brushed his fingers down Vox's vents. He perched on Vox's lap suddenly, framing his hips with his thighs as his hands roamed greedily beneath Vox's shirt, touching every inch of skin he could reach. Vox raised his eyebrows in surprise, gripping Alastor's hips instinctively.

"It might not be how we pictured it," Alastor said, "but we *are* home. We did the impossible, we outwitted Purgatory, and we did it *together*, just as we promised each other."

Vox pulled a face and glanced between the rails at the dark roots crawling through Hell. “It’s hardly a happy ending.”

“It’s happy enough,” Alastor said firmly as he grabbed Vox’s wrists and pinned them to the railing. “I have everything I want right here.”

Vox stared up at him with wide eyes and Alastor kissed him hard on the mouth, grip on his wrists tightening. “I’ve got you now,” he growled against Vox’s mouth. “I’ve finally got you and I’m never letting go. I’m going to worship every inch of you tonight. I’m going to touch every port and caress every track and I’m going to make you *mine* in every sense of the word, Vox. I want you. I need you and I’m so fucking *sick* of not having time to adore you properly.”

Vox’s fans worked harder. “Am I still in the trials?” he whispered. “Is this real?”

“Yes,” growled Alastor. “I’m real and we’re *home* and tonight, you belong to *me*. If our time here is limited, then I’m going to get you that collar with my name on it and I’m going to take you to a real funhouse. We’ll have a date at an aquarium, where you can sit beneath the shark tunnel for as long as you want.” Alastor’s ears lowered angrily. “I’ll take you dancing again and afterwards, we’ll go for dinner and we’ll toast Valentino because he did some vile things but he *deserved* a second chance, just as we were given and he shouldn’t have died alone like that, lost and afraid and suffering.”

Vox swallowed thickly, fingers flexing uselessly either side of his head. “I want that,” he whimpered. “I want to be yours. I... I want everything we should have had. I want everything I was never *allowed* to have.”

“I’ll give you *everything*,” Alastor hissed as he mouthed hot, wet kisses up Vox’s neck.

“Uh...”

Vox’s screen reddened as his gaze snapped to Husk. Alastor flicked an ear in irritation and smiled sharply at the bartender, still gripping Vox’s wrists. “Can we help you?”

Husk blinked then jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Vaggie is... uh... asking for you both.” He paused. “...If you aren’t *busy*. ”

“We’re coming,” Vox said sheepishly.

Husk’s brows pinched together as he wandered away with a mutter. “Preferably not in a public space.”

Vox’s screen burned and Alastor smirked and kissed his mouth heatedly before dragging him to his feet.

They padded through the hotel and towards the room Lucifer and Vaggie had placed Charlie in earlier that day. Vaggie emerged from the room before they could enter it and she looked exhausted. She caught sight of them and stiffened. Then she forced herself to relax and looked up at them tiredly.

“I... uh... wanted to thank you both. For helping us get Charlie out of there. For not giving up after all this time. For fighting so hard for her. You... I misjudged you both. I thought you were just a couple of selfish Overlords out for your own gain, but it turns out that you actually give a shit about Charlie, so... thanks.”

Alastor nodded in acknowledgement and Vox smiled half-heartedly.

Vaggie shifted her weight a little. “You also saved me too. Stuck with me. Kept me going even when that *bitch* got in my head, so thanks for that too.”

Again, both Overlords nodded in polite acknowledgement.

Vaggie’s lip wobbled as she stared at them.

“She won’t wake up,” she whimpered and she suddenly collapsed to her knees and held herself helplessly. “Lucifer healed her wounds but she isn’t waking up. She isn’t even *responding*. It’s like she’s already...” She trailed off, choked.

Vox stooped beside her automatically and pulled her into his chest almost protectively. “She’s strong. She’ll pull through,” he whispered. “Trust me.”

Alastor blinked at the familiar catchphrase and studied Vox for a long moment and he realised how much had *changed*. How much Vox had changed.

The overly controlling, obsessive, manipulative, power-hungry CEO had died, leaving the caring, empathetic man Alastor had known so long ago. Vox was a little bit damaged and anxious, and his head had changed shape, but he looked and acted a lot like the man Alastor had taught how to use a mixing desk *decades* ago, and his heart clenched with a strange combination of warmth and melancholy.

Vox glanced at Alastor and Alastor gestured silently to the room Vaggie had just exited.

With a gentleness he had relearned, Vox guided Vaggie into Charlie’s room and Alastor trailed after them, heart aching with empathy at the way Lucifer lay slumped over his daughter, clutching her hand as the tear tracks dried on his cheeks. His body shuddered with the lingering effects of his earlier sobs and now he seemed drained of energy.

Charlie’s skin was free of wounds and blemishes, but she appeared pale, her eyes sunken and her lips dry. Her breaths were shallow and her hand limp in her father’s hold.

She looked so *small*.

Alastor had never thought of Charlie as small before.

Lucifer’s gaze tracked slowly to Vox and Alastor but he said nothing, seemingly too exhausted to greet them.

The longer Alastor stared at Charlie's unresponsive form and Lucifer's listless gaze, the more choked he felt. When had he started *feeling* so much for those around him?

He watched Vox's expression dim with sorrow and sympathy as the Television Demon held Vaggie tighter, offering what little comfort he could, and she held her head up for a moment before a soft cry escaped her and she buried her face into Vox's chest.

Alastor looked around all the broken faces in the room and exhaled quietly, heart filled with a surprising amount of pain. He approached Charlie slowly and perched on the edge of the bed, watching her breathe for a little while as Lucifer thumbed circles into her lax palm.

Tentatively, Alastor slid his fingers into her other hand and he watched her expression carefully for any changes, ignoring Lucifer's staring as he did so. When there was no response, Alastor closed his eyes and murmured a chant beneath his breath and green sigils flashed around them. He felt Lucifer tense and heard him shift, but the Archangel made no move to stop him and Alastor's eyebrows furrowed in concentration as he attempted to heal whatever was preventing Charlie from rousing.

Except there were no physical wounds left, internal or external, which meant that there was something in Charlie's mind that was keeping her trapped in this state. Alastor couldn't heal psychological wounds. Not even Lucifer could do that.

He opened his eyes and slowly removed his fingers from Charlie's hand and he realised that his ears had flattened in distress.

"I'm sorry," he said softly to Lucifer, and he meant it. He wished he could wake the princess, wished he could bring Lucifer's daughter back after the man had lost his wife. He knew that pain - knew what it felt like to lose someone who meant the world to him. He had lost a few people, some more than once.

Lucifer dropped his gaze and nodded hollowly. "You brought her home," he managed. "It's more than I did."

“You tried,” Vox said quietly. “You argued with Heaven. Tried everything to break through Purgatory’s defences.”

Lucifer closed his eyes. “I have a dead wife, an unresponsive daughter, and The Root Of All Evil has taken over Hell and is planning on *killing* my people. That’s what *trying* got me.”

“Heaven should have helped,” Vaggie said angrily. “There was no chance of you beating her alone. Of *any* of us beating her alone.”

Lucifer’s empty gaze returned to his daughter as he fell silent once more.

A long-forgotten friend requested Alastor’s attention.

Alastor startled, ears swinging upright as he tilted his head, focusing on the oddly subdued creature within him.

There was another request - this one for Alastor to *open the door*.

After a moment’s hesitation, Alastor unlocked the cage he kept his silhouette in and he stared at his feet, watching it stretch its back out before tilting its head at him.

Vox’s frequency harmonised with his, curious and clearly pleased to see the silhouette.

The silhouette glanced over at Vox and grinned, winding around his legs playfully before brushing past Alastor and touching his shoulder in reassurance. Alastor observed it, surprised by its calm behaviour after twenty months of non-existence. Was that because Alastor himself had grown stronger? Less distressed? Less afraid? It was linked to his emotions after all.

The silhouette hovered at the edge of Charlie’s bed, studying the princess for a moment before lifting its gaze to Lucifer, who watched it with mildly curious eyes. It smiled at him

before focusing on Charlie again and narrowing its eyes before carding its shadowy fingers through Charlie's hair. When nothing happened, its tongue poked out of its crooked mouth and it brushed its fingers down her cheek, to her shoulder and all the way to her open palm.

Alastor's fingertips tingled and he raised his eyebrows at the memory of Charlie interacting with his silhouette months ago and him being able to *feel* her touch through it.

The silhouette watched her for a few more seconds before it *thrust its hand into her brain*.

Alastor knew it was her brain because he could *feel* its folds.

He made a sound of protest as Lucifer straightened and Vox and Vaggie made a noise of disgust.

It waved them off dismissively with the hand that wasn't groping around Charlie's brain.

Charlie bolted upright with a gasp, shoving the silhouette away roughly, and it tittered silently to itself before waving at her as she stared at it with wide eyes.

"What the actual fuck?" Vox asked quietly, which was a stark contrast to Vaggie and Lucifer's heartfelt "Charlie!"

Alastor shot his silhouette a disturbed look as both angels surged towards the dazed princess. The silhouette shrugged and raced towards Vox, squeezing him happily before returning to dormancy at Alastor's feet.

Vox and Alastor glanced at one another before returning their gazes to Charlie and her weeping angels.

She seemed exhausted, her responses sluggish, if not a little wary and distrusting, but that didn't deter Vaggie and Lucifer's fussing, so Vox and Alastor quietly stepped out of the room,

allowing the little family some much needed privacy.

They shut the door behind them and Vox rolled his shoulders. "I should probably let Vel know I'm back. And we should tell Rosie soon or we'll never hear the end of it."

Alastor hummed in agreement before sliding an arm around Vox's waist and kissing along his neck.

Vox rubbed Alastor's back thoughtfully. "Or you could fuck me in this very public corridor," he mused idly. "Wait for Husk to find us again and see how much trouble we get into."

"I like that option," Alastor drawled. "He should report any indecent behaviour to his manager - the hotelier."

"Going to give yourself a good scolding, are you?" Vox teased.

"I'm rather certain that's your job," purred Alastor, smirking when Vox's fans worked faster. He nipped Vox's neck playfully.

"Are you sure I'm not still in Purgatory?" Vox whispered. "I didn't opt for the 'happy bubble world' and forget, did I?"

Alastor sent a pulse of reproachful static nipping at Vox's skin and he huffed before shoving Alastor against the wall and ravishing his mouth. Alastor sucked greedily at his tongue, biting his lips and tugging him closer by the waist before Vox lurched backwards, panting.

"Al," he chuckled breathlessly and Alastor grinned at the sound of his lover's happiness.

"I'd very much like to suck your cock," said Alastor matter-of-factly.

Vox baulked before looking around them with a red-tinted screen. “Alastor!”

Alastor smirked impishly. “Actually, I’d quite like you to fuck my mouth.”

“*Alastor!*”

Alastor’s grin widened. “And then I’d like to push you onto our bed and-”

“I’m clearly still in Purgatory,” Vox interrupted. “And I’m surprisingly fine with that.” He kissed Alastor’s mouth chastely. “We really should visit Vel and Rosie. We’ve been gone an awfully long time.”

Alastor huffed in amusement and summoned his cane before gesturing for Vox to lead the way.

They arrived at V-Tower to find most of the rooms *empty*.

The porn studios had downsized under Angel’s direction, leaving a few tasteful sets perfect for exotic dancing and soft porn, but the biggest changes were to Vox’s department.

Entire floors were entirely dark and barren of equipment, and clearly had been for some months.

Vox frowned as he headed towards Velvette’s office, Alastor in tow. He studied his solemn partner through her office window for a moment before knocking. Velvette’s tired gaze raised to the window and her eyes widened before she *launched* out of the chair.

Vox pushed inside just in time to catch his young partner.

“You’re *alive*,” she breathed as she clutched at him, fingers digging uncomfortably into his back. “I thought you were *dead*, Vox! I’ve missed you so fucking much.”

He held her close as she buried her face into his chest and he breathed her scent in before smoothing his hand over her hair - it was shorter than he was used to seeing it.

“I’ve missed you too, doll,” Vox said softly and Velvette gave a suspicious snuffle before peering past him to narrow her eyes at Alastor.

“I’ve missed you too, you stupid buck. Come here. You’d both better have a good explanation for letting everyone believe you were dead.”

Alastor padded towards them and opened his mouth and Velvette put a hand up to stop him. “Wait! Does Rosie know you’re back?”

Alastor blinked. “Not yet.”

Velvette pursed her lips and swiped her phone from her pocket, fingers flying over the screen before she lifted it to her ear. “Guess who’s back?”

A pause.

“Got it in one. You need to get over here right now. I’ve told them they’ve got a lot of explaining to do.”

She ended the call and slid the phone into her pocket again before grabbing Vox and Alastor’s wrists and dragging them into the recreation room, which now contained an electric kettle and a new, polished, glass tea set.

“Sit,” Velvette ordered as she flipped the kettle on. “Rosie’s on her way.”

Vox watched in fascination as Velvette opened a cupboard to reveal a myriad of pretty tea caddies filled with breakfast teas and herbal teas and expensive blooming teas.

“Rosie comes around here often, then?” Vox asked and Velvette shot him a sharp look.

“You and Alastor were dead and Valentino wasn’t welcome anymore. I got lonely.” She looked away, frowning at the tea caddy in her hand. “And keeping this place running got hard. I lost two of my partners and suddenly had to manage the whole place myself. Angel really stepped up but... I didn’t know what to do with the tech side. I didn’t *understand* it. Rosie was there when shit finally hit the fan and I... I’m grateful to her. She’s a good woman.” She frowned at Vox and Alastor, daring them to argue or ridicule her.

Vox and Alastor listened silently and the tension between Velvette’s shoulders eased. “I’m sorry, Vox,” she said quietly. “I couldn’t handle it. I thought I’d be able to keep it running but... it was overwhelming. I had to shut most of it down.”

Vox felt a twinge of sadness in his chest at the idea of everything he had worked so hard for being shut down, at the reputation he had nurtured so carefully being swept away with the rest of his projects.

“It’s alright, Vel,” Vox said with a lop-sided smile. “You did well to keep the company going by yourself. It couldn’t have been easy.”

Velvette looked away, gaze a little glassy. “No. It wasn’t. And I didn’t do a very good job at it. Vox, I really am *sorry*. Everything was going wrong and deadlines weren’t being met and clients were getting angry and I couldn’t solve the bugs and I didn’t know who to *ask* and clients started getting violent and my side of the company began to suffer because I couldn’t divide my attention and-” She cut herself off with a wince and focused on making tea.

“You did the right thing,” Vox said gently.

“Except you’re back now,” mumbled Velvette. “If I’d just kept it together a little longer instead of breaking down like a spoiled *baby*-”

“You didn’t think we’d come back,” Vox pointed out. “And you were *grieving*, even if you pretend you weren’t.”

Velvette’s lip wobbled. “...You didn’t even say goodbye.”

Vox’s heart clenched and he shuffled along the couch, patting the space between him and Alastor. “Sit down, Vel. Pretend you’re not a badass Overlord for a few minutes and let me hold you.”

Velvette trembled before setting down the tea pot and shuffling towards the couch. She perched between them and Vox wrapped himself around her and simply held her tight.

Velvette melted into him before shooting Alastor a glare. “You too, dumbass. You didn’t say goodbye either.”

Alastor cocked an eyebrow before slinging an arm over the back of the couch and rubbing Velvette’s back with his other hand. She scowled at him and dragged him closer, until he was draped against her back. He made a soft noise before wrapping his arms tightly around both Vox and Velvette.

Vox bit back a smile as he watched Alastor’s antlers raise an inch taller, his lover clearly feeling protective of them both.

Velvette relaxed between them, eyes slipping shut. They stayed like that until Rosie arrived and when she found them, her hand flew to her mouth in surprise before her gaze warmed.

She hid the expression quickly when the trio turned to her and she frowned reproachfully at Vox and Alastor.

“You two had better start talking.”

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Discussion of suicide in the first part

A breather from all the chaos with some cameos from old friends ;)

The story isn't over yet...

Chapter 68: Bonds And Bondage

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

One week turned into two, which turned into a month, which turned into five months, and the roots infiltrating Hell grew thicker and thornier and longer. They multiplied, weaving their way into buildings and swallowing entire vehicles, and as the roots began to slither into sinners' homes, people grew angrier and fearful and despairing, and Roo's growing power allowed her to manipulate those around her, influencing them, tempting them, whispering evil little thoughts into their minds so she could feed off the pain and humiliation she wrought.

For some sinners, Roo's presence became overwhelming, and demand for Carmine's angelic steel increased in proportion with the number of sinner deaths.

Vox, no longer in control of almost every television channel in Hell, worked tirelessly to invent a device that could protect sinners against Roo's powers. Meanwhile, Alastor used his radio tower to send motivational messages across all of Hell to resist Roo's influences.

The problem was that neither Vox nor Alastor were very good at this whole 'helping *other* people' thing and whilst their hearts were (surprisingly) in the right place after having fought Roo for these past years, they hardly had Charlie's optimism and enthusiasm.

Speaking of Charlie... The princess was slow to recover. She was quiet and withdrawn and she startled easily, shying away from anyone who moved too fast or spoke too softly. She had a full-blown panic attack when the tip of one of Roo's roots had poked into her room, and Vaggie had moved her to the top floor, away from the black tendrils.

Hell was losing the fight against Evil, which meant that Roo would soon set her sights to Heaven once she ran out of souls to feed from.

Merely being in close proximity to a root set nerves on edge and thoughts spiralling, as though they sucked the happiness and joy from every nearby soul. Vox and Alastor weren't immune to their effects either - they were snappy with each other for the most ridiculous things, and their moods would drop randomly, anxiety prickling the backs of their minds at the strangest times. They would feel bursts of fear or flashes of panic, like every other sinner that strayed too close to the roots, and sometimes during their lowest moments, the roots would creep closer to them, honing in on them with the intent to curl around a limb and inflict greater fear and misery.

Walking around Hell had become a *hazard* - more so than usual.

Vox listened idly to the radio as he focused on a new set of codes for his test chip - the one that he could potentially implant into sinners' brains and partially protect them from Roo's influence (and if he had programmed a few advertisements for VoxTek products into the chips, then sue him - he wasn't perfect).

"So grab a good chum and stick to them like glue!" Alastor's voice filtered through the radio cheerily. "Travelling alone may result in certain death, but your pal can rescue you from your gloomy thoughts, and you can stop your pal from driving that six-inch angelic blade through their miserable little heart. Everyone's a hero! Imagine the deals to be earned from saving someone's soul. Now, there's a reason to keep living!"

Vox's lips twitched with a smile and he shook his head in amusement as he continued his project. No matter what trials one faced, you couldn't knock the deal out of an Overlord.

Vox let Alastor's voice wash over him as he worked, altering codes here and there, consulting the book of black magic that Alastor had let him borrow, drawing sigils into the chip's programming, and letting his Velvee-supplied sweet latte grow cold in the process.

"...But that's the problem, isn't it? We *can't* defeat this. So many demons have already lost their lives to these damn roots - and not just sinners. Hellborns aren't immune. The princess herself is teetering on the edge of despair and Heaven would rather watch us *burn* than lift a finger to help lock that *bitch* away. This is our undoing. Our final end. There is nothing left for us here. Nothing but misery and rage and *lust* and we will *all* eventually succumb to it, so why bother fighting?"

Vox whipped his head towards the radio, heart leaping into his throat before he launched into the power cables, only to *fall out of them* when a root slowly stretched up and curled around a power line, snapping it.

He growled to himself, squeezing his eyes shut at the burst of misplaced fear in his chest, and he jumped into the streetlights instead and hopped towards the hotel, sprinting up to the radio tower.

The thorny root was already most of the way up Alastor's right leg, biting into his thigh, constricting tighter and tighter like a python.

Alastor's ears were flat, claws embedded into his mixing desk as he squeezed his eyes shut. Vox darted towards him and, with great effort, dragged him out of its grip. They tumbled backwards onto the floor and the root crashed onto the floor with them before slowly slinking towards Alastor again.

Vox heaved the trembling Alastor to the opposite side of the room, holding him close, stroking his ears and carding his fingers through his hair.

"We're going to die," Alastor whispered, choked, and Vox shook his head firmly.

"No, sweetheart. No, we're not. She's making you feel that way. Breathe. Focus on me."

"She's going to kill us," Alastor whimpered. "What's the point in fighting? We're only delaying the inevitable."

"This," Vox said fiercely as he held Alastor tighter, desperately trying to stop his lover's spiralling mindset. "*This* is why we're fighting. Us. Damn it, Alastor, we're fighting because if we give up, we lose *this*. We lose our chance to be with each other and I'm *tired* of letting her tear us apart."

Alastor looked up at Vox and the fog in his eyes began to clear. He pulled a face, disorientated for a moment, and slid his gaze to the mixing desk and to where the root had slipped through a crack in the floorboards. He stared at the root as it lay innocently on the floor, waiting for another victim to touch it.

Alastor put a hand to his head with a soft growl before shooting Vox a grateful look. Vox smiled half-heartedly and brushed his fingers down Alastor's cheek.

"You okay?" Vox asked gently.

Alastor nodded, baring his teeth when the root crept an inch closer. "Blasted things. How can they be impervious to angelic steel?"

"I suppose because Roo is," Vox sighed as he wrapped his arms securely around Alastor. Vox and Alastor hadn't attacked Roo personally, but they'd seen other sinners have a stab at it - quite literally. Those that didn't get immediately snatched mid-lunge by roots were dismayed to find that their angelic weaponry bounced off Roo's skin like rubber swords. Then, they were either crushed to death by roots or forced to feel so much pain and misery and fear that they turned their weapons upon themselves.

Vox watched a second root creep through a cracked window.

"We need to get out of here," he murmured as he tugged Alastor to his feet.

They descended the stairs into the hotel and as they passed Charlie's room, Alastor felt his silhouette slip free. He kept a looser reign on it these days.

It hovered near Charlie's door and looked to Alastor and Vox expectantly.

Alastor nodded at it, giving it permission to enter and it slipped inside the room, Vox and Alastor knocking politely.

At first there was no answer, then there was a sharp gasp followed by a long pause and finally the door inched open.

Charlie peeked out nervously.

“Are you... looking for your shadow?” she asked Alastor quietly.

“Actually, it was looking for you, my dear,” Alastor said, attempting to soften his smile.

There were dark circles beneath Charlie’s eyes and her gaze was hollow. She hunched in on herself instinctively. “It’s very friendly,” she mumbled.

“It seems to like you,” Alastor said. “Which probably means *I* like you.” He winked playfully at her.

She stared at him, unsmiling, and Alastor’s grin faded a fraction.

“You know... It didn’t exist in Purgatory. That’s how I can tell that this Hell is *real*. If my silhouette is here, then I mustn’t be trapped in Purgatory,” Alastor said gently.

A frown furrowed Charlie’s brows and she glanced off to her left, presumably at the silhouette.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Vox piped up. “When I was stuck in my last trial, Purgatory made a copy of Alastor, but it couldn’t copy his silhouette. That was one of the reasons I figured out I was still in the trial.”

Charlie studied the silhouette for a while and reached towards it.

Alastor raised a hand to his cheek, arching an eyebrow as Charlie touched the silhouette.

“Keep it,” Alastor said after a moment. “It might bring you some comfort. When you grow weary of it, send it back to me.”

Charlie glanced at him, startled. “...Alastor, I can’t do that...”

“Nonsense! Of course you can,” Alastor said with a charming grin. “My dear, you are the only one who can *touch* it. I’m not sure how or why, but if it brings you even a sliver of reassurance, then I’m not concerned by the details.”

Vox could tell that the last part was a lie. Alastor’s gaze was burning with curiosity.

Charlie stared at the silhouette for a long moment. “...Thank you, Alastor.”

Alastor bowed a little before taking Vox’s arm and steering him away from the traumatised princess. When the door closed, Alastor froze and gasped and Vox turned to him in alarm. It was strange to see him with no shadow.

“Al?”

“That’s going to take some getting used to,” Alastor murmured, exhaling slowly. “I think she just hugged it.”

Vox watched Alastor worriedly. “You sure that was a good idea?”

Alastor waved a hand dismissively. “The poor girl has been through a lot. If my silhouette helps, then I can learn to live with a few innocent *hugs*. ” He frowned. “Probably.”

Vox snaked an arm around Alastor’s waist. “You can recall it if it gets too overwhelming, right?”

Alastor nodded and relaxed against Vox’s side. His smile dimmed.

“Vox?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

Alastor licked his lips and wouldn’t meet his lover’s gaze. “...How long do you think we have left?”

Vox stilled and instinctively looked around for a root crawling across a wall or slithering through the carpet.

“There isn’t-” Alastor cut himself off and lowered his gaze. “Stupid question. Forget I mentioned it.”

Vox slid a finger beneath Alastor’s chin, forcing him to meet his gaze. “It isn’t stupid. What’s wrong?”

Alastor pulled a frustrated face. “I’ve always... I’ve always had *hope* that there was a way out of any situation. Even in the trials, I pushed through because I knew there had to be an end. And when I lost hope, you quickly gave me a reason to hope again. But this...” He glanced back to Charlie’s door, then to the door that led to the radio tower. “Vox, I can’t see a way out of this.”

Vox's heart ached. To be quite honest, he couldn't see a way out either. Roo couldn't be killed and her magic had infected all of Hell, murdering *thousands* of demons already - sinners and Hellborn alike.

And her power was growing every day.

"I don't know," Vox admitted as he pulled Alastor against his chest. "But I do know that I'm not ready to give up on us yet. If Purgatory taught me anything, it's that I should fight for you until my last breath, until Roo decides that my time is up. I won't ever give up on you again, Al. I promise. Even if all of Hell crumbles around me."

Alastor stared at him for a long moment before dragging him in for a heated kiss.

"Vox, I... I'm afraid," Alastor breathed against his lips.

Vox wrapped him in loving static, their frequencies intertwining instinctively.

"So am I," Vox confessed quietly before he stole another kiss and then another.

They stumbled to Alastor's room, kissing each other rather desperately and as Alastor fumbled for his key and shoved the door open, they unlatched from one another and froze at the nightmarish roots spilling out of the vent above the bed, and branches upon branches of them pouring in from the window and creeping over the carpet like a grotesque waterfall.

"Damn it!" Alastor snarled.

Alastor had been sleeping at V-Tower for the past week. He clearly hadn't entered his room in that time.

Vox narrowed his eyes and grabbed Alastor's lapels, herding him towards the bed as he ravished his mouth. "Fuck it, I'm having you," he growled against his Radio Demon's lips.

Alastor fell onto the bed, dragging Vox with him. “Vox, if they touch us...” he said as he nipped at his lover’s lips.

“I’m sick of letting her control us,” Vox hissed as he pushed Alastor up to the pillows and pinned him there. “Fifty years of pining and heartache because of *her*, being yanked around by her chain, and when I *finally* get you back, she forces us into that nightmarish void, and now she’s going to slowly break us and everyone else in Hell like we’re her playthings? I’m done being her toy. I’m having you. I don’t care if these roots fucking swallow me whole. *I want you*. Every inch of you. You’re *mine*, Alastor, not hers.”

Alastor’s ears swivelled, gaze wide and excited, his entire focus on Vox.

“Prove it,” Alastor challenged. “Prove that I belong to you.”

Vox narrowed his eyes before gripping Alastor’s hip and shoulder and pouring a low voltage into him until Alastor’s back arched and a mewl of pleasure left his throat. Vox amped up his static, stimulating every nerve of Alastor’s as his frequency grated against the Radio Demon’s in challenge.

Alastor’s fingers bit into Vox’s back as a choked moan left him.

“Who do you belong to?” Vox growled against Alastor’s mouth.

Alastor’s eyes flashed mischievously.

“Roo.”

Jealousy roared inside Vox and he released Alastor’s shoulder in favour of fisting his hair tightly and forcing Alastor to expose his throat as he increased the voltage a little.

“Try again,” Vox snarled.

Alastor’s grin grew. “Roo.”

Vox gripped Alastor’s hip harder before biting gently at his neck. Alastor’s legs wrapped around his waist and Vox rutted against his already-tented trousers as he increased the voltage another notch.

“You’re fucking *mine*, Alastor,” Vox hissed and when Alastor’s antlers began to grow with pleasure, Vox released his hair in favour of gripping one and tugging.

As predicted, Alastor growled and tried to roll Vox onto his back, but Vox held him down, biting harder at his neck.

Alastor immediately curled a hand around the back of Vox’s neck, squeezing roughly before spreading his other fingers possessively over Vox’s ass.

Vox’s fans worked faster. “Nowhere to run, beautiful buck,” Vox purred. “Nowhere to hide. I’ve caught you.”

He watched Alastor’s face carefully. This was something new they had been trying recently. It had started after Vox had playfully chased Alastor through the shadows and lights after a date at the Pride Ring’s small aquarium, and had ended with Vox feeling a little possessive and Alastor getting rather *excited* by the whole situation.

Alastor suddenly began to stretch and twist as his eyes morphed into dials, and Vox eased his grip worriedly, quickly cutting the current flowing through his lover’s body.

Alastor squeezed his neck in encouragement and Vox looked at him warily.

“Keep going,” Alastor said softly and Vox’s breath hitched as he resumed the low flow of electricity and watched his lover grow into his trueform.

He was beautiful. His long limbs and sharp claws and impressive rack of antlers and those dark, intimidating eyes... He was the most gorgeous creature Vox had ever seen.

And he belonged to *Vox*.

“So fucking perfect,” Vox growled as he let his own body shift and mutate into the form he rarely let anyone see.

He matched Alastor’s size and gripped his antler once more, and this time the reaction was wilder. Alastor tossed his head back with a bellow and clenched his thighs around Vox’s angular hips as he gripped Vox’s neck, groped his ass and attempted to throw him onto his back.

Vox wrestled with him for a few seconds before tearing his top buttons open and biting down on his shoulder.

Alastor’s breath hitched, ears on high alert, and Vox grinned as he nipped his way up to Alastor’s jaw. “Is that tail flashing white?”

Alastor nodded.

Vox untucked Alastor’s shirt and unfastened his belt before thrusting his hand into the back of Alastor’s trousers and pulling roughly at his tail. Vox increased the voltage another notch and Alastor arched, teeth gritted even as his frequency weaved through Vox’s with clear arousal and adoration.

Vox swept the hair from Alastor’s face before jerking his antler again and eliciting a snarl. He leaned close to Alastor’s ear. “You know you’re safe?” he whispered.

Alastor nodded again, pecking Vox's screen before thrashing beneath him in another attempt to overpower him.

Vox lost his grip for a second and they struggled before Vox manhandled his lover onto his hands and knees, then secured a hand around his throat and slid his fingers into the front of his trousers and jerked him firmly.

He pulled Alastor upright onto his knees, holding him flush against his front as he nipped and sucked greedily at his neck.

Alastor reached behind him, holding Vox tighter to him before rocking his ass against the bulge in Vox's trousers.

"Strip," Alastor demanded. "If I'm to be prey, I want to see my predator in all of his glory."

"Undress me then," Vox snarled into the back of Alastor's ear and he released Alastor, allowing the Radio Demon to turn. As Alastor reached for his tie, Vox caught his wrists, raking his gaze over Alastor's disheveled clothes.

"Undress yourself first," Vox ordered. "I want to see my prize."

Alastor's chest heaved and he quickly followed Vox's command, never taking his gaze off the Television Demon in a sort of challenge, which Vox rose to. He kept Alastor's gaze, humming in approval as his layers fell away.

His dark skin was flushed and his neck was bruised from Vox's love bites. His cock was proud and he didn't shy away from Vox's gaze, no, he held himself straighter, lifted his hips higher so Vox could take a long look at his body.

“Look at you,” Vox purred as he trailed teasing claws down Alastor’s chest and over a nipple, lower and lower until he suddenly squeezed the base of his lover’s cock. Alastor rutted into his fist with a choked moan. “Incredible,” Vox praised.

He gripped Alastor’s dick tighter. “Undress me. Slowly.”

Alastor flashed him a smirk before tearing him out of his tailcoat, waistcoat and shirt, sending a few of the buttons flying.

Vox growled and grabbed Alastor’s antler and threw him onto his hands and knees before freeing his own dick and rutting against Alastor’s ass. Alastor fisted the sheets and Vox stilled as he saw the minute tense of his lover’s muscles. He dipped down, pressing his lips against Alastor’s back.

“Nothing happens without your consent,” he reminded softly.

Relaxing, Alastor shifted his tail out of the way for Vox to continue rocking against him. Vox pressed another kiss to his spine before wrapping both hands around his antlers and pulling.

With a curse, Alastor twisted to grab Vox’s arm. They wrestled playfully before Vox pinned Alastor onto his back, one hand tugging his antler and the other pinching his nipple.

Alastor groaned and drove his fingers into Vox’s vents and the ports at his back, pulsing wave after wave of intense static through him. This time, Vox cursed, grinding his dick against Alastor’s until they both hissed at the friction.

Vox shimmied out of the rest of his clothing before crushing their lips together. He swallowed Alastor’s moan of approval and arched when Alastor yanked at the cables winding around his thigh.

He released Alastor’s nipple in favour of fisting his tail and Alastor trapped Vox’s hips between his thighs, rutting desperately against him as his fingers dug into Vox’s ports. Then

his gaze caught on the strip of dark red leather around Vox's neck - the slim collar that he had been hiding beneath his clothes since that morning.

Alastor touched the collar reverently, admiring the golden tag with his name on it.

"I missed you when you went to work," Vox whispered.

Alastor hooked a finger beneath the accessory and Vox's eyes slipped shut at the pressure around his throat. He swallowed and Alastor slid another finger beneath the tight collar, nudging it against his Adam's apple.

"So needy," Alastor purred. "Desperate little thing, aren't you?"

Vox shivered at the approval in Alastor's tone before he jerked Alastor's antler and slipped a possessive hand beneath his back, lifting him so he could grind harder against Alastor's cock.

"Are you forgetting who's in charge here?" he said lowly before smoothing his tongue over Alastor's throat, relishing his forest-y taste.

"Perhaps," drawled Alastor. "I'm getting quite *bored*."

He was lying. Vox could *feel* that he was lying in the way his breaths shook and his body ran warm and his dick hardened. Still, Vox was enjoying the game.

He gripped the base of Alastor's dick and sent a pulse of current through it and Alastor gasped, tossing his head backwards as his chest heaved. Vox pulsed another reprimanding wave of electricity through his body and Alastor cried out quietly and hooked his claws around the cables snaking around Vox's arms.

Smirking, Vox let his cables slide away from his limbs, winding around Alastor's body in a messy pattern. Alastor's eyes widened in surprise and Vox tore his hands off his body and

pinned them either side of his impressive antlers.

Alastor's breaths shallowed as the cables slithered around his arms, tying him to the bed posts.

Vox studied his face for a moment. "Colour?"

"Green," Alastor said immediately and Vox recognised the eagerness in his gaze.

He smirked deviously and plucked at one of the cables that stretched over his chest, and the cable sprang back into place, striking Alastor's perky nipple and making him whine in pleasure.

Vox caught Alastor's chin. "Now who's desperate?" he teased, commanding his cables to *move*, and Alastor let out a delicious groan as the cables trapped his weeping dick in a tight hold.

The circuit traces on Vox's trueform glowed a deeper red with his arousal as Alastor writhed beautifully beneath the cables. He snapped another cable against Alastor's skin, this time in the crease of his groin, and Alastor attempted to arch but couldn't get very far, so settled for a whimper instead.

Vox reached for the cable that had tightened between the claws of Alastor's hoof and he snapped it against the gland there, humming in approval when Alastor cried out in pleasure and the scent of musk grew thicker in the air.

He nuzzled at the tuft of fur poking out from beneath the cables at Alastor's chest. He trailed a finger down Alastor's jaw with a smirk that didn't match the loud hammering of his heart.

"Who do you belong to?" Vox demanded quietly as the cables slithered and tightened around Alastor's trueform.

“You,” Alastor panted, dials flickering wildly in his eyes.

Vox slipped his thumb between Alastor’s lips and Alastor sucked at the digit greedily.

“Again,” Vox ordered. “Who does your heart belong to?” His left eye spiralled hypnotically, not to force Alastor to answer, but merely to keep his gaze.

Alastor’s ears lowered submissively and Vox was delighted to see that he didn’t even *attempt* to fight the trance.

“You,” Alastor said, softer this time as a shadowy tendril stretched towards Vox and curled around the golden tag at his throat. “It will always be yours.”

Vox’s eye stopped swirling. He didn’t need hypnosis to keep Alastor’s attention. He leaned down to bite a nipple and Alastor squirmed beneath him with a moan. Vox sucked and licked at the nub before biting at it harder and Alastor fought against his restraints with a growl before falling against the pillows again with a snarl of frustration.

“I want to touch you,” Alastor demanded.

“No,” Vox said as he kissed over Alastor’s chest and down to his stomach. He nuzzled at the fur leading to his dick and weaved his fingers beneath the cables at Alastor’s hips, letting his claws sink lightly into the flushed flesh. Alastor attempted to arch into his touch without much success.

“Vox,” Alastor snarled and Vox winked at him, cock aching at Alastor’s frustrated pleasure.

He licked at the insides of Alastor’s thighs with his long tongue before smoothing the tip against what was visible of Alastor’s balls, and the Radio Demon thrashed again before falling still, chest heaving.

“Vox, *please*, ” he begged, lustful static biting at Vox’s skin.

“I love hearing you beg,” Vox teased, releasing one of Alastor’s hips in favour of threading his claws beneath the cables trapping Alastor’s balls and fondling them gently. Alastor panted, jerking his hips a fraction and Vox tutted and snapped one of the cables lightly against his balls.

Alastor’s eyes blew wide and a whine escaped him, but he stilled obediently.

Vox resumed fondling him. “How does it feel to be trapped, my gorgeous deer?”

Alastor’s gaze tracked to the collar around Vox’s neck. “Exquisite.”

Vox raised an intrigued eyebrow. “You like being chased? Being caught like common *prey*?” He watched Alastor’s expression carefully for any signs of discomfort.

Alastor’s heated gaze met his. “Only if you’re the one chasing me.”

Heat pooled in Vox’s belly and he dipped his head to lap at Alastor’s dick between the cables. He shifted a few cables, freeing more of Alastor’s dick so he could lap at the fluid dripping from its tip.

Alastor whimpered as he watched, claws tearing through the sheets. “Please let me touch you.”

Vox hummed thoughtfully. “No,” he said again before swallowing Alastor to the base.

He moaned obscenely around his lover’s cock, sucking and licking messily as he slipped his fingers beneath the cables at Alastor’s balls again. He squeezed and massaged and sucked at

Alastor's cock like it was the best thing he had ever tasted, and his other claws bit deeper into Alastor's hip, breaking the flesh.

Alastor panted and whined and fisted the sheets helplessly.

"Fuck me," he begged after a few moments, eyes screwed shut. "Vox, *please*."

Vox's gaze snapped to his lover's face as he swallowed Alastor whole. He pulled off with a wet *pop*.

"Are you sure?" Vox wanted nothing more than to bury his cock in his beautiful, writhing lover, but they hadn't succeeded with that since Purgatory and Vox was already demanding a lot of Alastor right now. Their three previous attempts had ended with Alastor frustrated at his own reactions and Vox comforting him whilst being privately upset with himself for making his lover uncomfortable.

"I'm sure," Alastor panted, forcing himself to meet Vox's gaze. "Vox, *please*. I love you. I trust you. I want this." He exhaled heavily. "I'm also incredibly aroused and since I can't fuck you right now, I need a plan B."

Vox tilted his head. "I could free you." He recalled his cables but before they could move too far, Alastor snarled.

"Don't you *dare*."

Vox blinked and ordered his cables to tighten around Alastor once more.

He looked obscene with his body trapped in crisscrossing cables and only his head and cock free, but he released another lovely moan as the cables tightened against his flesh and Vox swallowed thickly, fans switching onto their highest setting.

One of Alastor's shadows reached into the bedside table and retrieved some lubricant, which it threw at Vox's chest. Vox wasted no time in smearing Alastor's barely visible asshole with cool raspberry lube. With a smirk, Vox commanded his cables to snap around Alastor's cock again, trapping it against his stomach.

Alastor cried out and Vox's cables shifted and dragged the Radio Demon's ankles towards his ass, until his knees were bent and his thighs were parted wide, displaying his hole for Vox to tease a claw around.

"Pretty little thing," Vox purred as he traced his claw around the spasming muscle, watching the lube glisten beneath the dim lights.

"Vox," pleaded Alastor, voice cracking.

Vox grinned impishly and brushed his thumb over the tight ring. "Hm?"

Alastor's gaze narrowed. "Vox," he said again, lower this time. *A warning.*

Vox smoothed two fingers down his perineum before replacing them with his leaking dick. He circled the head around Alastor's hole slowly before teasing it back up his perineum.

He gasped when a shadowy tendril shoved into his ass.

"Alastor!" Vox choked out as the shadow slid in and out of him, creating a strange and pleasurable sense of pressure.

"You're taking too long," Alastor said with a sharp smirk. "Now, sit still and take the punishment like a good little picturebox."

Vox snarled and gripped Alastor's thighs tightly, forcing them wider apart. "Fuck you," he snarled before pushing inside Alastor and Alastor's eyes widened, claws fisting the sheets

and ripping them further as his hooves dug into the mattress.

Vox stilled and laced a hand with Alastor's, letting his lover squeeze him as he settled.

"You're safe," Vox whispered and Alastor's eyes flicked to his face. He looked torn, uncertain, and Vox squeezed his hand and carefully curled over his lover, placing a reassuring palm over his cheek. "I promise you're safe, Smiles. You say stop, we stop."

Alastor's body was tense, smile strained. He glanced at the cables restraining his body, suddenly looking nervous.

Vox quickly loosened the cables but didn't remove them from his lover's body, allowing Alastor to break free if he wished to.

"Tell me what you need," Vox said gently as Alastor's breaths picked up speed, ears standing to attention. "Tell me what you're feeling."

"I don't..." Alastor squeezed his eyes shut and Vox carded his fingers through his hair, keeping his body as still as possible. "I feel... I... Vox..."

"There's no rush," Vox murmured, kissing the green 'X' on Alastor's forehead. "Tell me what you hear."

"Leaves rustling."

"Listen closer," Vox whispered.

Alastor's eyebrows pinched together. "...Fans. Your fans. Buzzing. Your components."

“What do you smell?”

“Sea salt. Copper. You,” Alastor said as he slowly prised his eyes open.

“What do you see?”

Alastor stared at the collar around Vox’s neck and relaxed. “Just you, in all of your demonic glory.” He shifted slightly. “Tighten your cables. I like them.”

Vox obeyed the order, pleased when Alastor relaxed fully.

“I feel you wrapped around me,” Alastor answered the unspoken question. “I feel your warmth and the ache of where you bit into my neck and shoulder. I feel the sting of where your claws broke through the flesh of my hips. I feel the throb of my balls where you snapped your cables against me. I feel your hand squeezing mine, grounding me. I feel *you*, Vox. I feel your desperation for me, your arousal and love. I feel your hard dick pressing inside me, hungry for more but too worried about me to simply take what you want.”

Alastor smiled warmly. “Move, Vox. I’m alright now.”

Vox studied him for a moment longer before carefully thrusting inside his lover and when Alastor’s gaze gained a note of arousal, Vox pushed deeper and nipped his lover’s fluffy ear. “Fuck me with your shadows,” he breathed.

Alastor growled, desire shining in his eyes as he summoned another shadow and thrust it into Vox’s ass.

“So damn hot,” Vox groaned as he fucked his lover in earnest, tangling both hands with Alastor’s and watching the Radio Demon writhe against his restraints.

A second shadow shoved into Vox and Vox groaned unashamedly into Alastor's chest before he struck Alastor's prostate.

Alastor whined deliciously and Vox captured his mouth, swallowing the sound as he claimed his lover over and over, tightening the cables around his throbbing dick and sliding them roughly over the glands in his hooves.

"Vox!" Alastor gasped and Vox fucked him harder, hitting his prostate over and over as the cables rubbed against his nipples and curled around the base of his tail.

Vox smirked as Alastor's shadows wrapped around him possessively, trying to mirror the path of the cables on Alastor's body. The shadows inside him explored his ass curiously before finding his prostate and Vox groaned as they took turns in ramming the organ.

He latched onto a bruise at Alastor's neck, sucking greedily, *devouring* him, and Alastor cried out.

Vox leaned back quickly to watch the last moments of Alastor's release and he released the cables at the bedposts and threw Alastor's wrists over his head as he pulled the Radio Demon into his lap. He bound Alastor's wrists together so he and Alastor were trapped against one another and he wrapped protective arms around Alastor's back, one hand tangling into his hair as he ravished his lover's mouth and fucked up into him.

Alastor whined and whimpered at the overstimulation but he pushed closer, panting into Vox's mouth and throwing his thighs tight around Vox's waist before the cables slithered around his ankles, binding them together.

Shadows curled around cables and cables snaked around them both, keeping them flush, tying them together, and Vox loosened his control over them, letting them coil and move according to his emotions instead. Alastor's claws curved around the back of his neck as others sank into the ports behind his head and Vox moaned into his mouth as shadows slipped into his vents, teasing at him, caressing him, *claiming* him in every sense of the word.

At another strike of his prostate, Vox came inside his lover, hot and thick and Alastor mewed happily at the sensation, nipping Vox's lips hungrily until they were raw and swollen.

"You like that?" Vox growled, tightening his grip on his lover. "You like when I fill you up?"

Alastor nodded as he nuzzled into Vox's neck.

"You're *leaking*," Vox hissed as he nipped Alastor's jaw. "I can feel you. You're so fucking pretty." He pinched a sensitive nipple and Alastor whined into his neck, digging his claws into Vox's back.

"You're *mine*," Vox snarled as his cables curled around them both protectively, Alastor's shadows quickly copying. "All mine."

Alastor's breaths shook as he nosed at the collar around Vox's throat before nipping roughly at his neck. Vox thrust into him again and Alastor cursed and trembled against him.

Vox rubbed his back. "How do you feel?" he asked quietly, restraining himself from pushing up into Alastor again. He couldn't get enough of this lovely man.

"Full," Alastor breathed as he shifted his hips. "Warm. Feels good."

Vox couldn't help but jerk his hips again and Alastor raked his claws down Vox's back, leaving shallow scratches.

Vox's hunger grew at the possessive behaviour. This wasn't like the other times people injured him during sex - Alastor wasn't trying to hurt him, he was *marking* Vox as his, staking his claim, much like Vox had when he had littered Alastor's neck with love bites.

He shoved Alastor onto his back and fucked into him with his soft cock, pleased when Alastor moaned and whimpered and mewed with overstimulated pleasure.

Alastor clutched at his back. “Yours,” he hissed. “I’m yours, Vox.”

Vox finally released Alastor from his cables and he inhaled sharply when the Radio Demon slammed him onto his back and his hands roamed greedily over his body, tracing scars and sliding into vents and tugging mercilessly at cables and stroking his antennae and smoothing over the trail of dorsal fin-like spines at his back.

He rolled his hips, bouncing on Vox’s soft dick, and Vox gripped his thighs hungrily, digging his thumbs into the creases of his groin before wrapping his claws around Alastor’s soft cock and milking him.

Alastor ravished his mouth and Vox fought back, their tongues sliding together for a few seconds before Alastor tugged at a wire inside his vent and won their little battle, claiming every inch of Vox’s mouth as his own.

“If I could, I’d fuck you again,” Vox muttered and Alastor wrapped his claws around his throat, Vox swallowing merely to feel the pressure there.

“Later,” Alastor promised. “We’re doing this again later.”

Vox shivered in excitement and stole another messy, open-mouthed kiss.

Alastor shoved him down, pinning him to the mattress as he sat upright, chest heaving, hair in every direction, sweat clinging to his skin, and Vox’s cock still buried deep inside him.

He was *gorgeous*.

“I’ve never been this *hungry* for anyone before,” he panted as he ran a hand through his hair. “Is this what *lust* feels like?”

Vox's hands skated up his stomach and over his chest, pinching a nipple on their journey and making Alastor's grip on his throat tighten.

"No," Vox said, struggling to catch his own breath. "I've felt lust. Lust isn't like this. This is *love*, Alastor. This is being unable to keep your hands off each other because you want to touch and give pleasure. This is craving someone so deeply that you want the world to know that you belong to each other. This is still wanting each other long after the party's over - wanting to hold on tight and never let go because the man you love is so fucking clever and beautiful and strong and- Alastor, I'm so *proud* of you."

Alastor swallowed before collapsing on top of Vox and peppering kisses over his screen. Vox threw his arms around him and they clung to each other and rolled their hips and stole kisses as they touched each other, until they were both trembling from oversensitivity.

Alastor carefully pulled off Vox, but he didn't go very far as he settled on top of Vox again. Vox immediately slid two fingers between his ass cheeks, wanting to feel the fluid dripping out of him.

"We're doing that again," Alastor growled as he tucked his face into Vox's neck, not bothering to shift into his natural form. Vox loved that Alastor wanted him to see him in his trueform. There was nothing left for either of them to hide and Vox tugged Alastor deeper into his neck, smiling when Alastor's claws settled over the golden tag of his collar.

He petted Alastor's hair and ears as the Radio Demon closed his eyes in contentment, their frequencies harmonising perfectly.

Vox's gaze wandered, intending on letting his lover doze for a while before he cleaned them both up.

He blinked.

"Alastor," he said in alarm.

Alastor made a noise of query.

“Alastor, *look*.” Vox pointed over his shoulder to the window and Alastor stared at the empty space for a moment, uncomprehending before his eyes widened and he turned to the vent above the bed.

The roots were gone.

The roots *never* disappeared. They moved and grew and multiplied, but they never simply *vanished*.

Alastor and Vox sat up, looking around in confusion. Alastor slid off the bed and glanced through the window to find that the roots were still present outside, thick and thorny and ugly.

Vox shuffled behind him, wrapping a protective arm around his middle, still not ready to stop touching his lover just yet. Alastor relaxed against him as they peered through the window.

“I don’t understand,” Vox said quietly. “Why did they vanish?”

Alastor brushed his fingers against the sill, frowning at a couple of broken thorns that remained. “Perhaps they didn’t. Perhaps they *receded*.”

“Why?” Vox asked, frowning.

“I don’t...” Alastor trailed off and glanced at where Vox’s arm lay curled around him. He tilted his head then made a face. “I’m not sure.”

Vox glanced at the ruined sheets and a thought niggled at the back of his mind. Perhaps...? No. Surely not. It couldn’t be that simple.

He held Alastor closer and kissed his neck.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: spicy chapter x

Don't worry guys, the happiness won't last >:)

Chapter 69: Did You Really Think They Could Win?

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom (TAKE HEED)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“How are you boys holding up?” Rosie asked tiredly. She accepted a cup of tea from Velvette with a grateful smile and Velvette retrieved two more cups for Alastor and Vox - strong tea for Alastor, extra sugar for Vox.

Velvette moved around Rosie’s space with obvious ease, suggesting that this wasn’t exactly her first time visiting the back rooms of Rosie’s Emporium. Vox and Alastor hadn’t expected to see her when they had dropped by, but it was a welcome surprise.

Velvette took a seat next to Rosie and she seemed more withdrawn than usual, tucking her legs under her chair and wrapping both hands around her cup. She was quiet and Rosie glanced at her worriedly before setting her cup and saucer in her lap and placing a protective hand on Velvette’s opposite shoulder. Velvette relaxed a fraction.

Alastor and Vox looked at Rosie in alarm, noting the exhaustion behind the cannibal Overlord’s eyes. There was a slight frown that wasn’t usually there and her dress was creased - an obvious indication that something was *wrong*. Rosie prided herself on her pristine appearance.

“We’re... okay,” Alastor said slowly and Rosie’s frown deepened a bit more.

“I heard your broadcast the other day,” she said pointedly and Alastor grimaced at the reminder.

“I didn’t notice the root,” he said quietly and Velvette flinched and leaned a little closer to Rosie.

A heavy silence fell between them.

“I’ve lost twenty-two percent of my town’s population to them,” Rosie said after a while. “I’ve tried to stop them, tried contacting their minds directly, but nothing works. They keep *dying*.” She scowled. “And when they’re not turning angelic steel on themselves, that foul *creature* finishes them off.”

She looked at Vox and Alastor, fire in her gaze. “She struts around Hell like she owns the joint. She doesn’t even *attempt* to hide. I’ve seen her around here a few times and I’ve told my people to lock their doors but what’s the point? She sends those terrible roots in and just...” Her gaze flicked to Velvette and for the first time, Alastor noticed the bruises and scratches around the young Overlord’s neck. Thick, deep scratches and an encircling bruise, like something thorny had curled around her throat and refused to let go.

Clearly, Vox had noticed the marks too, for his fists clenched atop the table and angry static filled the air.

“There *must* be a way to defeat her,” Rosie said firmly. “Where is Lucifer in all of this?”

“Bargaining with Heaven,” Alastor sighed. “*Pleading* with the other Archangels to help us.”

Vox scoffed. “Fat chance they’d ever do that. They *want* us to die. One less problem for them. Can’t start a revolution if everyone’s already dead.”

“And no one in Heaven cares about Hellborn,” Alastor agreed.

“What about the sins?” Rosie asked. “Can they do anything? They’re pretty powerful.”

“Leviathan is already dead,” Alastor said. “Three weeks ago, Roo descended upon Envy and reportedly turned her against herself. One half killed the other and they both died.”

Rosie pursed her lips before glancing down worriedly at Velvette, who had yet to look at any of them. Rosie swept a strand of curly hair from her face before looking at Vox and Alastor helplessly.

“There must be *something* we can do,” she said desperately. “We can’t keep living like this. These roots cause misery and fear and anger and all sorts of other awful feelings merely by being *near* them. What happens when we can no longer avoid them? Should we just accept our fate?” she asked angrily.

Alastor watched the root growing outside one of the windows, covering the majority of the glass. “I haven’t got any answers,” he murmured.

“How did you beat her in Purgatory?” Rosie demanded. “You got out. You must have beaten her somehow.”

“We weren’t playing against Roo,” Vox said. “We were playing against Purgatory itself.”

“Roo’s powers were weakened by Purgatory. It was restraining her. Once the programme ended, Roo gained strength by feeding off the souls lost in Purgatory. We barely made it out of there,” Alastor said.

“We *ran*,” Vox said simply. “We didn’t really fight.”

Rosie’s expression fell and she looked away.

“How did Purgatory keep her weak?” Velvette asked quietly.

Vox’s gaze softened as he studied his anxious partner. “She couldn’t face the trials because they were based on what she fed from. She can’t feed off herself.”

Velvette frowned and sat up slowly. "...Because it would kill her?"

Vox shrugged. "I'm not sure. I don't know if she *can* die."

Velvette stared at her cup for a long moment. "You said she gained strength by feeding off lost souls... Was Purgatory *starving* her? Is that why she couldn't send her roots out to Hell before?"

"That and Purgatory had her locked up," Vox said.

Velvette shook her head slowly. "Except it *didn't*. Because she managed to put a chain around both of you. She talked to you at the bookshop. She could send her magic through the 'cracks'; the weak points in Heaven, Hell, and Earth. She *possessed* you. So she wasn't fully restrained. Her body was restrained but her magic was just *weak* because Purgatory was starving her and she couldn't get through the warded door without someone opening it for her."

Alastor, Vox, and Rosie turned to her curiously and a familiar spark flickered to life in her eyes once more. "Maybe... Maybe we just need to figure out how to starve her?"

"There is so much misery and fury in Hell," Rosie said gently. "This place is like a buffet for her. And these roots can *generate* those emotions within people, even when they aren't feeling that way. How can we possibly starve her?"

Velvette scowled thoughtfully before raising her gaze to Vox. "That... doesn't make sense. What you two said about her not being able to complete the trials herself because she can't feed on her own emotions. Surely she doesn't *have* to feed on every bad emotion? Surely she could have completed the trials without devouring herself?"

Vox frowned. "Well, why else would she not complete the trials herself? If that was what weakened her powers, why not beat the trials and use her powers to entice someone to open the door and set her free?"

Alastor straightened and he looked at Velvette with wide eyes as the epiphany hit him. “Because to beat the trials she would have to *overcome* fear and lust and fury and everything else she feeds on. If The Root Of All Evil overcomes *Evil*, what does that make her?”

“Powerless,” Velvette said, a small smile pulling at her lips.

Alastor grinned. “*That’s* how Purgatory starved her. How it kept her trapped. It would have forced her to change everything she was made of. It would have stripped her of power and she would have been lost in Purgatory forever, with no hope of contacting anyone to help her escape.”

Vox frowned and shook his head slowly. “...No. Because overcoming Evil would have stripped her of power and practically made her mortal.” Vox glanced at Alastor. “Purgatory *used* to have an ‘eject’ button until Roo weaved her magic through it and broke that button. What if... What if the whole point was for Roo to complete the trials herself? Purgatory *learned*. The Archangels might not have intended it, but what if Purgatory altered the rules a little? What if Purgatory was trying to give her a shot at redemption?”

Alastor blinked. “It was trying to *help* her. To stop her from being seen as a monster.”

“Positive emotions,” Vox muttered to himself thoughtfully before he met Alastor’s gaze. “The roots in your bedroom. You overcame your fear of-” He cut himself off, glancing at Rosie and Velvette before smiling at Alastor sheepishly. “And you showed me that, sometimes, bruises and scratches borne of passion really are a mark of love-”

“Vox! Gross!” Velvette said as Rosie wrinkled her nose.

Alastor’s cheeks heated as Vox threw them all another sheepish look. “Okay, sorry, but the point I’m trying to make is I think *that’s* why the roots receded.”

“The roots receded?” Rosie asked, shocked as her gaze darted between Vox and Alastor.

“The direct opposition of what those roots feed off,” Alastor mused. “Like a weedkiller.”

“Confidence, comfort, love, kindness,” Vox listed. “Shit like that must be *poison* to those roots.”

Rosie raised an eyebrow. “So... everything Charlie’s hotel was created to teach sinners?”

Alastor and Vox stared at each other, a sinking feeling in their stomachs. Velvette snorted.

“So, basically we’ve got to encourage people to stay at the hotel? Or make all of Hell take part in Charlie’s crazy trust-building exercises?” Velvette smiled falsely. “Sounds super easy!”

“And Charlie is too *broken* to lead it,” muttered Alastor. “The poor girl is hardly keeping herself together.”

Rosie smiled weakly. “Sounds like a position just opened up for you boys.”

Alastor and Vox whipped their heads around to her indignantly.

“Well, you two are the only souls that have ever beaten the trials,” she said gently.

“...Or you could talk to Roo,” Velvette said carefully. “Explain Purgatory’s plan. Surely she doesn’t want to be a monster? It isn’t her fault that she was created like that. Maybe she’d like a chance at redemption?”

Anxiety settled in Alastor’s chest and he wasn’t surprised when Vox’s hand seized his under the table, seeking reassurance.

Facing Roo again wasn't something either of them wanted.

Still, they nodded, because Heaven wouldn't help them and angels had fears and they could be provoked into anger and misery the same as demons could. Angels would break just as quickly because Heaven was supposed to be endless happiness, so what happened when Roo destroyed that? Would they fight to get it back or would they succumb to her torment?

Heaven wouldn't help them, not merely because they hated demons, but because they were *scared* to lose what they already had.

And every demon in Hell was too afraid and too miserable to take part in Charlie's trust exercises. It would be near impossible to convince them to fight back that way.

Alastor squeezed Vox's hand. Overlords were supposed to be *protectors*. People forgot that. If the Archangels wouldn't help then it appeared that Vox and Alastor were Hell's next best hope of survival.

Alastor had never wanted to be a hero, but he couldn't watch his friends *die*.

And with Vox by his side, well, he'd come to learn that anything was possible.

...Hopefully, Roo wouldn't kill them on sight.

Vox's arm was tight around Alastor's waist, his other hand tapping restlessly against his own thigh. Alastor himself was tense, tail erect and ears twitching as he pressed into Vox's side and waited for Roo to stroll closer.

Vox's static prickled nervously at Alastor's skin before he suddenly turned and pressed a firm kiss to the Radio Demon's cheek. Alastor slotted his fingers through the ones resting over his

hip.

“Breathe, my dear,” he muttered under his breath. “She can *taste* your fear.”

“We must be insane,” Vox whispered and Alastor squeezed his hand comfortingly.

“We have a plan. Any signs of hostility, you jump into the lights, I vanish into the shadows, and we meet at the hotel.”

Vox shuffled his feet, nudging Alastor a little closer to the shadows of the park’s trees. It was midday, and whilst the park’s electrics hardly stopped functioning merely because the lights weren’t *on*, daylight put Alastor at somewhat of a disadvantage regarding his shadow-travel.

Vox vibrated in place as the roots around them began to move faster, twisting and turning and branching in response to Roo’s presence.

Alastor placed his hand on Vox’s back, stilling him. “We can do this,” Alastor promised quietly.

Swallowing thickly, Vox threw him a wide-eyed look. “I’m so fucking scared.”

So was Alastor, but he could pretend to be strong for Vox. He lifted a hand to Vox’s screen and opened his mouth.

“My my. It’s been a while since I saw you both.”

They whipped around to face the innocently smiling monster ahead of them. The roots around her were as thick as cars, tearing up the ground and resealing it magically behind them.

Alastor's heart thudded in his chest and he could feel his prey instincts kicking in as he became hyperaware of everything about Roo - her lack of scent, the soft breathiness of her voice, her hawk-like gaze, the black magic glittering inside her coat as it swayed heavily around her.

He wanted to run. He *needed* to run. The thing approaching him was *pure evil*.

Vox's hand tightened around his hip, sensing his instinctive flight response, and his frequency slid against Alastor's erratic one, grounding him. There was fear in Vox's body language, but he was providing Alastor with a pillar of support; strong and steady and protective.

Alastor breathed in slowly, deeply, focused on his lover's scent and the soft, comforting hum of electronics, and he held his head higher, pressing pointedly into Vox's side in full view of Roo.

Roo's lips curled a little before settling out again as she came to a halt mere feet away from them.

"You've been hiding from me," she said in her eerie wind-like voice.

"We need to talk," Alastor said, proud of how steady his voice was.

She arched an eyebrow. "Make it quick. I'm a busy woman."

"Purgatory was trying to help you," Vox said. "It was trying to offer you a chance at a better life."

Roo narrowed her eyes before shaking her head. "You'll need to improve your lies if you want to trick me." She lifted a hand and a thick root reared above her like a horse.

“He’s not lying!” Alastor said quickly, gaze entirely focused on the root. “Purgatory *wanted* you to complete the trials. It wanted you to achieve redemption. It wanted to help you be seen as something *more* than a monster.”

Roo’s sharp gaze snapped to him. “*Monster?* Is that how you see me? I came into existence this way. I didn’t make the wrong choices like you mortals. I wasn’t given free will. I am and always have been this way.” Her smile was more of a snarl now.

“Right,” agreed Vox. “But what if you didn’t have to be? Purgatory devised a way to bend the rules of the Archangel’s prison. It tried to help you. It wanted you to overcome the very Evil that you feed from, that winds through your magic. It wanted to *save* you.”

Roo regarded him carefully. “And then what?”

Vox shrugged. “Live a normal life? Live a life where you aren’t feared and isolated? I don’t know. We didn’t give it a chance to explain.”

“How can you be sure?” Roo asked as she stalked towards them.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Alastor replied. “Purgatory may have started out as a prison, but it learned. It adapted. Perhaps it held compassion for you after so many centuries of entrapment? It certainly loathed the deaths of mortal souls - even created individual worlds for them to live happily within. I think it perhaps wanted you to be *better*.”

“So, it just... wanted to change the very fibre of my being?” Roo asked with a thin smile. “It wanted to manipulate me?”

Alastor’s ear twitched, unease filling his chest. “It wanted you to stop suffering.”

“Who’s to say it wouldn’t kill me the moment I gave up my power?” Roo drawled.

“It couldn’t kill,” Vox reminded. “That’s the whole point. It needed souls to *choose* to end their own lives.”

Roo hesitated, brows furrowing slightly.

“You could have more than a life of feeding off fear and misery and anger,” Vox said quickly, sensing her curiosity. “You wouldn’t have to be isolated. You wouldn’t have to constantly feed to keep your strength. You could experience happiness and warmth and *love*.”

“Purgatory is gone,” she said coolly. “My chance at ‘happiness’ with it.”

“Not necessarily,” Alastor said. “Lucifer could rebuild the programme. If you come willingly this time, he wouldn’t need the help of the other Archangels. You could beat the trials yourself and try something new. Create instead of destroy. Doesn’t that sound better than all of this senseless death? You’ll run out of souls at some point and then what? Will you starve?”

Roo looked around the empty park slowly before returning her gaze to Vox and Alastor. “It certainly sounds... plausible.”

Vox perked up and Alastor felt his cautiously excited static build in the air. “Come with us. We can take you to Lucifer and we can fix this mess. Give you a second chance. Give you a better life - one worth living,” Vox said.

Roo stepped towards them, looking intrigued. “Alright. But... there is *one* problem with all of this,” she said, frowning thoughtfully.

“What’s that?” Alastor asked warily.

She smiled at him with too many teeth. “You assume I don’t *enjoy* being a monster.”

The roots moved faster than Alastor could process and his first instinct was to push Vox towards the nearest street lamp before blinding agony burst throughout his chest and Vox's screams filled his ears.

He looked down to find a root impaling his chest.

Suddenly, a root curled around his chin and snapped his head to the left and he watched in horror as Vox scrambled towards him before a root burst through his screen, shattering it entirely. Vox stumbled, howling in pain, and Alastor barely had time to screech his name before three more roots rammed through his stomach, tearing out his liver and intestines and his processor.

Vox came to a dead halt and static fritzed around him. Alastor watched, traumatised, as more of Vox's organs and components fell out of the gaping wounds in his stomach. Finally, Vox sank to his knees and crumpled onto the path, lifeless.

Alastor couldn't breathe, heart pumping far too fast as he watched blood pool around his lover's limp body.

This was *real*.

Roo chuckled and carefully removed her root from Alastor's chest, and Alastor barely felt the green luminescent sutures sealing him back together.

The moment the roots left him, his knees gave out and he crawled over to his lover, rolling him onto his back and placing shaking hands on his stomach and broken screen. He summoned his own magic, green sigils flashing around them as he muttered a familiar chant, but there was no soul for the magic to latch onto, no energy, and Alastor concentrated harder, searching desperately for a frequency that had fallen deathly silent.

He poured everything he had into the healing ritual, dragging power from every shadow within reach, and Roo's laughs grew louder and harsher as she approached and kicked him onto his back.

He stared up at her, too stunned to speak, heart as shattered as Vox's screen.

A collar appeared around Alastor's throat and she held the other end of the chain tight enough to suspend him away from the ground.

She leaned closer with a soft smile. "Did you really think you could win, little fawn?" she whispered.

Tears streamed down Alastor's face as he trembled.

She stood to her full height, looking between them both in distaste. "I have no use for either of you now." She dropped Alastor's chain and he slumped onto the ground before scrambling over to Vox and throwing himself over his body as he wept for the man he loved.

He didn't bother to look at the roots as they tore him apart, his focus entirely on Vox.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: CHARACTER DEATH (...sort of)

Before y'all come for me with your pitchforks, story isn't over yet!

Chapter 70: A Heavenly Herd

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Air filled his burning lungs as he was *launched* through time and space and thrust into consciousness. For a moment, he was *nowhere*, then his feet touched the ground and he staggered at the momentum, stumbling into a couch at great speed, toppling over it, scrambling for purchase on the cushions in an effort to stop, before he landed flat on his ass on a soft carpet.

Alastor tensed, gripping the edge of the couch behind him as he caught his breath.

He was supposed to be dead.

Why wasn't he dead?

Footsteps. Someone running.

His ears flicked towards the sound and he whipped his gaze up to them as they emerged in the doorway of what appeared to be a kitchen.

It took a moment for Alastor to recognise what he was looking at.

Who he was looking at.

His chest tightened and he lost his breath once more.

“Mom?”

Was he... Was he back in Purgatory?

His mother stared at him, expression frozen with shock, before tears filled her eyes and she raced towards him, falling to her knees and throwing her arms around him, dragging him into her chest as she sobbed and held him tightly.

“You’re *here*,” she cried into his neck and he clutched at her instinctively, inhaling her scent and tugging at her until she collapsed onto his larger frame.

He didn’t care if she was an illusion. He didn’t care if this was Purgatory.

He had just lost the man he loved. He had faced twenty months of *torture* only to lose Vox a few months later and he *needed* the comfort. He’d take what he could get.

She touched his face and ran her fingers through his hair and kissed his head and squeezed his shoulders like she was desperate to feel him, to convince herself that he was real, and Alastor let her. He slid his hands over her arms and back and through her fluffy chocolate and white-speckled wings and-

Wings?

He gripped her shoulders and pushed her backwards, frowning at her in confusion. He stared at the silver halo glistening atop her head.

“Nis? Are you alright?”

Alastor startled at the familiar deep voice that floated in from the kitchen.

His mother nodded, wiping her eyes quickly with the back of her hand. “He’s here. Jacques, he’s *here*.”

There were heavier footsteps and Alastor's ears pricked towards the doorway as his father stepped into the room, halo, wings and all.

His father froze and stared at him for a long moment before marching towards him and falling to his knees beside his mother, tugging Alastor into a bone-crushing hug.

Alastor inhaled sharply before clinging to him, burying his nose into his neck and breathing in the familiar scent of whisky and ink he remembered from over a century ago.

Finally, it became too much, and Alastor cried into his father's shoulder as he clutched desperately at him, praying that this illusion would never end. He was tired of fighting. Tired of losing everything. He was happy to live in this lie, in a world where his parents were still alive.

"We have a friend of yours," his father whispered into his ear and as he said it, Alastor felt a familiar prickle of shocked static against his skin.

His father shifted and Alastor looked up to find Vox darting towards him.

Alastor's heart raced and he sprung to his feet, catching Vox with open arms and staggering backwards when Vox threw his body into his, kissing him deeply on the mouth and clutching at his hair and back as though he never wanted to let go.

Alastor returned the desperate embrace, kissing back just as eagerly, and when Vox's frequency intertwined with his, it began to sink in that this might not be an illusion.

"I thought I'd never see you again," whimpered Vox as he tangled his fingers in Alastor's hair and pressed their heads together, pulsing adoring, longing, terrified, frantic static between them. "I thought she..." Vox trailed off and kissed him roughly once more and Alastor fisted Vox's back and splayed a protective hand over the back of his screen as Vox ruined his mouth.

“...A little more than a friend, then,” Alastor’s father said quietly as he stood.

Alastor stiffened and turned to his stunned mother and father, cheeks burning. “Mom, Dad, this is-”

“Vox,” finished his mother, shooting Vox a stern look. “Yes, he showed up on our floor a little while before you did. Seemed surprised to see us. Said he was your friend. He failed to mention how *close* you two are.”

Vox gave an awkward laugh. “Ah... sorry?”

Alastor’s father regarded them both for a moment before tilting his head at his son. “Were you always gay or did that happen when you went to Hell?”

“Jacques!” huffed his mother, and his father shot her a sheepish look.

“‘S just a question.”

Alastor’s mother straightened out her dress and shook her head in exasperation before clasping her hands together and smiling at Vox and Alastor. “Sit at the table and tell us everything. I was just about to start dinner when Vox dropped in. You boys must be starving - you look like you haven’t eaten a good meal in *decades*. ”

There was a familiar flare of excitement in Alastor’s stomach at the thought of his mother’s cooking and Alastor held Vox’s hand tightly as they followed his parents into the kitchen-diner.

Vox couldn't take his eyes off Alastor.

He wondered if the Radio Demon (Radio Angel?) had noticed his own appearance yet. Probably not. Alastor seemed rather overwhelmed by his parents' presence and Vox understood.

Still, Alastor was *beautiful*.

Well, Vox always thought that Alastor looked beautiful, but there was something *softer* about him now. His clothes had changed colours to fit Heaven's aesthetic, his jacket becoming white and his tie growing golden, and his trousers were now a pastel grey to match his shirt. The holes and tears had been repaired and Vox knew Alastor would *hate* the new look and would search for something more red whenever the next opportunity presented itself, but Vox wasn't paying much attention to the clothes anyway.

Alastor's skin had more colour to it - matching the tone that he had in life, and his hair was darker and slightly curled; a rich brown with blackened tips rather than his usual striking red. He had removed his jacket whilst he ate, rolling his sleeves to just below the elbow like his father, and Vox couldn't stop staring at his dark arms and the tuft of *white* fur poking out from where he had unfastened the top couple of buttons of his shirt (*oh, how he wanted to rub his face into that fur*).

His ears were different too - a gorgeous combination of fawn and crimson with white inner fluff and black tips. His tiny antlers remained black but with a fine layer of velvet lining them, and Vox itched to *touch*, to undress Alastor and see the rest of him, to see what other secrets he was hiding.

Unlike Vox's parents, who didn't share any similarities with his demon form, Alastor's parents also held deer characteristics. His father, Jacques, bore the great antlers and broad chest of a red deer, whereas his mother, Denise, bore the petite ears and orange and chocolate-coloured hair of the pudu.

Together, they were like a small, mismatched herd, but Alastor looked genuinely *happy*, and Vox couldn't help but lay his hand on his lover's thigh as he listened to the little family catch up with one another.

Alastor responded immediately, never breaking the conversation as he curled a hand over Vox's, like the action was instinctive, like it was *natural*. No hiding it from his parents, no awkward smiles as he tried to dismiss Vox's affection. There was no shame in Alastor's actions because he *wanted* his parents to know exactly what sort of relationship they shared and that fact made Vox swallow as his heart thumped loudly in his chest.

He loved Alastor and clearly, Alastor loved him just as deeply.

He smiled and studied the golden halo floating above Alastor's antlers.

"Oh, how lovely," said Denise and Alastor's gaze flicked to Vox, his ears standing to attention as he blinked curiously.

"You're *glowing*, my dear," Alastor said softly and Vox frowned in confusion and glanced down at his white shirt, noticing the faint pink glow beneath it. He rolled up a sleeve, irritated to find that the circuit tracks painted onto his skin now extended down the full length of his arm, all the way to his knuckles, and he raised his eyebrows at their deep pink hue.

When he next looked up, he found Alastor studying him closely, gaze roaming over his arms and his greyish-blue skin and the pastel blue and white tailcoat over the back of his chair. Then, his gaze flicked to the square cyan halo floating above Vox's antennae and his smile widened a little further.

Their eyes met and Vox's heart fluttered wildly in his chest at the adoration in Alastor's grin.

Vox's circuit traces glowed a deeper pink and Alastor made a noise of amusement as Vox's pupils formed digital hearts.

Alastor squeezed Vox's hand tightly.

“Say, whatever happened to Harriet?” Jacques asked after a moment, earning an elbow to the ribs from his wife. He looked at her indignantly and she rolled her eyes and shook her head. “I thought you two were on track to get married?” he continued.

Alastor’s smile fell, ears lowering and lips curling in distaste, and Vox baulked in shock at the expression.

“Harriet left,” Alastor sneered. “Thought me *weak* for ‘letting’ those men...” He trailed off and looked away bitterly. “She was ashamed to be seen with me after what happened. She decided it would be best if we parted ways.”

Denise’s grip on her fork tightened. “She *what?*”

Jacques bristled. “That white-livered hussy! Where is she? She must have landed in Hell. No way could she have earned a place in Heaven after *abandoning* my son when he needed support. When he’d lost his parents. When he’d been *violated* by those foul, perverted, fucking *pigs*-”

Jacques’ antlers elongated with his rage, fists clenching, and Denise gripped his arm tightly. He glanced at her, chest heaving and gaze filled with pain, and Vox remembered that Jacques had *witnessed* some of what those men had done to Alastor. He had, after all, been the one to give Alastor the opportunity to escape before he had been murdered.

Jacques’ sharp gaze landed on Vox and, riled like this, he really was quite intimidating. He narrowed his eyes at Vox for a moment and Vox shifted in his seat uncomfortably before Jacques turned to Alastor instead.

“He’s been treating you well?” he asked sternly as he began to rise from his seat. “Doesn’t take advantage of you? Hasn’t *forced* you into a homosexual relationship because he somehow found out about those vile monsters and thinks he can *intimidate* you into sucking his-”

“Jacques!” Denise snapped and her husband flinched. “*Look* at them. Look at the way Vox gazes at our son. Watch how Alastor leans into his touch. Those boys are in *love*, you old

fool.”

Jacques huffed, ears lowering as he settled into his seat again.

“Just... wanted to make sure,” Jacques grumbled.

Alastor’s gaze softened. “Vox is my rock,” he said to his father. “He pulls me out of my darkest moments and takes care of me when I can’t take care of myself. He is my best friend and confidant. He’s the man who owns my heart, the only person I have ever dared to love since Harriet.” Alastor met Vox’s gaze. “I think I chose well.”

Vox’s breaths shook and he longed to cup his lover’s cheeks and kiss him, over and over until Alastor melted against him. Instead, he settled for slotting their fingers together.

As Alastor turned to his father, his smile fell again and he frowned almost worriedly, and Vox inhaled sharply at the expression.

“I know it isn’t what you expected,” Alastor said quietly. “It isn’t what I expected either. But I... I really do love Vox.” He lifted his chin a little as his lips drew into a thin line. “And whether you approve or not, I will stand by his side.”

Jacques raised his eyebrows as Denise’s gaze softened.

“Oh, Allie, of *course* we approve,” she said.

“Son, we just want you to be happy,” Jacques agreed.

Alastor looked between them both with tentative hopefulness. “You don’t mind me being romantically involved with another man?”

Denise smiled and shook her head.

“Times have changed,” Jacques said gently. “It took me a little while to realise that, but how can love between two people be wrong? If Vox makes you happy, then he’s very welcome in this family.”

Vox shot Jacques a startled look before he swallowed and grazed his fingers over the corner of Alastor’s mouth. Alastor glanced at him in query.

“Al, you’re not smiling,” Vox whispered.

Alastor frowned before raising his fingers to his own lips and gasping. His hand flew to his neck and his breaths grew quicker with his rising excitement.

“The chain, the sutures...” Alastor breathed. “They’re *gone*.” His eyes darted from side to side thoughtfully. “I *died*.”

A smile slowly crept across Vox’s face as he cupped his lover’s cheek. “The contract ended,” he whispered.

“Contract?” Denise echoed.

“Roo had him on a tight leash,” Vox spat and when she stared in confusion, he realised that she had no idea who ‘Roo’ was. The higher angels hadn’t revealed what was happening in Hell.

Vox and Alastor glanced at each other before starting at the beginning. They explained everything, from Alastor’s first night in the bookshop, to the trials, to Roo’s escape from Purgatory and by the end, Alastor’s parents looked horrified and protective and *angry*.

“We need to speak to the Archangels,” Jacques declared as he stood, antlers wide and impressive and eyes flickering a bright, celestial white. “She needs to be stopped.”

“We can’t let your friends die,” Denise agreed as she took her husband’s side.

Alastor’s ears stood to attention and he bounced to his feet. Vox stared at Alastor’s parents in surprise. “You... You *want* to help them? Even though they’re demons?”

“You two were demons a few hours ago,” Denise pointed out before she wrinkled her nose. “Clearly a mistake. How they condemned *my son* to Hell is an absolute outrage and I *will* be having words with whomever decides these things.”

“I murdered three people,” Alastor said quietly.

“They weren’t *people*,” Jacques growled. “You did the right thing. You protected others from suffering the same fate as your mother and I. You should have landed in Heaven for killing those *monsters*.”

Alastor’s ears lowered, humbled. “You... You aren’t disappointed in me? I thought... I thought if I ever saw you again, you’d be *upset* about the man I’ve become. About earning myself a spot in Hell. About becoming an Overlord and getting myself tied to Roo, and-” He cut himself off and Vox could see how he was trying to stay strong in front of his parents. “I thought you’d be ashamed of me being raped.”

Jacques stiffened and Denise quickly rounded the table, pulling her son into her arms and kissing his head until he trembled and buried his face into her shoulder.

“Never,” she hissed. “You did what you thought you had to do to protect yourself, to survive in Hell. You’re a *good* man, Alastor. A good man who was a victim of something terrible. You’ve made mistakes, we all have, but don’t you, for one second, think that your father and I are disappointed or ashamed of you. We *love* you, demon or not.”

Jacques joined them, pulling them both against him, and Alastor trembled harder, shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

“Looks to me like you’ve been making some pretty good decisions lately if you wound up here after Roo killed you. I’ve not heard of too many demons getting redeemed. Sounds like you two were, dare I say, *heroic* facing Roo like that to save everyone.” Jacques carded his fingers through Alastor’s loose curls. “We’re proud of you, son. We always have been and we always will be.”

Alastor clutched at them, breath hitching between his quiet cries, and they rubbed his back and kissed his head and held him tight between them. Denise glanced over at Vox and opened her arm in invitation.

“Come here, Vox. You’re part of this family too. Sounds like our son wouldn’t be here right now if you hadn’t been by his side every step of the way.”

Vox lowered his head. “Not *every* step...”

“We all make mistakes,” Jacques said firmly as he, too, opened his arm in invitation. “What matters is you made it right. You came back to him. You *stayed* when he needed you most, despite all the pain and mistrust between you both. You’re a good man, too, son. Come here.”

Vox froze at the praise and the endearment. *Son*. No one had ever called him that before. No one had ever called him a ‘good man’. No one had ever considered him part of their family.

Alastor turned to him expectantly, eyes a little puffy and cheeks tear stained, and Vox shuffled over and wrapped Alastor tightly in his arms as Alastor’s parents held them both.

Chest tightening, Vox tangled his fingers in Alastor’s soft curls and pressed their heads together and worked on keeping his breaths steady. Alastor squeezed his shoulder and Vox tugged him closer as he basked in the warmth and affection of the small family.

A family that he was now part of.

He smiled weakly to himself and pressed his lips to Alastor's head gratefully.

"Come on," Jacques said after a few moments. "We have Archangels to harass."

"So, I can't speak to the Archangels without an appointment, but I can't *make* an appointment because I'm not on the approved list?" Jacques asked incredulously. "What kind of backwards bureaucracy is that?"

The sheep-like angel stared at him boredly. "Requests should be typed up and sent to the Archangels via physical letter through the Principalities."

Jacques folded his arms. "How do I send a letter to the Principalities?"

"You can't. You're not on the approved list."

Jacques threw his hands up in exasperation. "How do I *get* on the approved list?"

"Principalities will only speak to council members. You may submit an application to become a member of the council and if approved, then you may approach the Principalities with any formal requests," drawled the sheep-angel in a monotone voice.

Jacques smiled tightly. "And how long does it take to be approved for council membership?"

"Current waiting time is six months. But you need to have provided significant contributions to the improvement of Heaven, otherwise your request will be denied."

“Of course,” muttered Jacques. “Thanks for nothing.”

“You’re welcome. Have a blessed day.”

Jacques stalked away, rejoining Denise, Alastor, and Vox with a frustrated shake of his head. Denise chuckled and arched an eyebrow at her husband. “Great, now we’ve tried ‘the official way’, perhaps we can try my way, dearest? The plan I said we should have started with before you wagged your finger at me and said ‘Heaven has proper channels for these sorts of things’?”

Jacques ducked his head. “Yes, darling. Let’s try your way.”

She patted his cheek and turned smartly on her heel, the three men watching as she approached the sheep-like angel.

Vox startled as Alastor’s shadows suddenly slid into his ports and muted his audio receptors, deafening him. He turned to Alastor in surprise and found him and his father holding their hands over their ears.

Vox’s gaze flicked to Denise and he watched her talk to the sheep-angel. No, not talk - the words were too long and drawn out and there was a soft smile resting on her features, one that reminded Vox very much of Alastor’s own showman smile.

Was she... Was she *singing*?

Alastor leaned in front of him, catching his attention, and Vox followed the two deer as they crept around the distracted, almost... *hypnotised* angel and headed through the doors that led to the stairs.

Alastor removed his shadows from Vox's ports once the doors had closed behind them, and Vox could hear the faint, dreamy echo of Denise's voice. It was enchanting and beautiful and Vox could feel his troubles melting away even though he could barely hear her, and *oh* he could listen to that voice for the rest of his afterlife and not have a care in the world and-

The doors opened and Denise stepped through with a gentle smile, her song ending, and Vox blinked, feeling a little disorientated. He frowned groggily and Denise chuckled at his expression.

"Keep moving," she chirped as she ushered them all up the stairs and it took a few seconds for Vox to remember how his legs worked.

Fortunately, Alastor slipped an arm around his waist and forced him to walk, grinning at his dazed expression.

"My mother was a lounge singer in life," he explained. "A very good one. It was a full house every night."

"The best in Louisiana," said Jacques proudly as he pecked her on the cheek.

Alastor's eyes twinkled at their affection for one another and Vox's heart ached for his lover. Alastor had missed his parents so dearly... His life with them had been cut far too short and he had been dropped in Hell with the understanding that he would never see them again.

"It would make sense that in Heaven, her powers would make her somewhat of a siren," Alastor said as he gazed at his mother in awe. "I played piano for her a few times at the clubs and I remember how the bartenders would stop pouring drinks and just... watch and listen. She was..."

"*Powerful*. Simply wonderful," Jacques finished, throwing an adoring look at his wife as they trotted up the stairs.

Denise chuckled and let him take her hand and raise it to his lips.

Vox's chest tightened. *This* was how parents were supposed to be. This was how a *family* was supposed to look. Unconditional love and affection and support.

Alastor should never have had this ripped away from him.

"Is that how you met?" Vox asked. He wanted to know everything about this sweet little family. He wanted to learn everything he could about Alastor and his life.

"It was," Jacques said fondly. "I was a columnist for the local paper. I was working my way up to more exciting news, but I had to start with local pieces first. There was a new bar opening up and my boss asked me to write a piece for it, so I went on opening night and guess who had been asked to sing that evening?"

A smile pulled at Vox's lips.

"I was besotted," Jacques said, squeezing his wife's hand. "How could I not be? I walked right up to her that very night after her set and asked to take her out for dinner. And she said..."

"No," Denise snorted, earning a grin from her husband. "I was already in a relationship with a gorgeous black man. It wasn't a particularly *romantic* relationship, but I didn't want to be a nerdy white boy's social experiment." She shot him a coy look. "No matter how tight that shirt looked over your chest."

"I came back each week," Jacques said. "Sometimes twice."

"Stalker," Denise teased.

"Hey, I respected your rejection," Jacques chuckled. "I returned for your music."

Her gaze softened. “You wrote a column about me.”

“You deserved the recognition.”

“No one had ever spoken about me like that before. I was just another background singer in a sea of dive bars and run-down clubs,” she said quietly.

“You were magnificent,” Jacques whispered. “You still are. The most brilliant woman I’ve ever laid eyes upon.”

She held his hand tighter. “Your parents didn’t think so.”

Jacques wrinkled his nose. “My parents were miserable and bitter and stuck in their ways. I had no intention of being in a loveless marriage like theirs.”

Vox stared at Jacques for a long moment before casting his gaze to Alastor. Like Jacques, Vox hadn’t followed in his parents’ misery and had instead found someone to cherish and adore. He had found happiness.

“You weren’t at all what I expected,” said Denise. “You were the most loving, most supportive man I’d ever met. You were good to me. You’ve always been so good to me.”

“You deserve it,” Jacques whispered and Vox studied Alastor for a few moments, watching the warmth and contentment in his gaze and his lopsided smile and his relaxed ears. He looked happy. Happier than Vox had ever seen him.

He startled when Alastor slotted their fingers together and Vox’s breath hitched when his lover met his gaze. Alastor wanted him to be a part of his family. He wanted to love Vox in the same way that his parents loved one another. He wanted them both to have what his parents had.

Vox wanted that too. He brought Alastor's knuckles to his lips, eyes never leaving Alastor's, and Alastor's gaze was bursting with adoration and devotion as he watched.

They made it to the higher floors and read the golden signs that explained what could be found on each level.

"Gabriel's office, this way," Denise said quickly as she herded them onto a long and wide corridor. "He's our best shot."

As they journeyed down the corridor, glancing at the plaques on each office in search of Gabriel's, Vox slipped his arm around Alastor, smiling when Alastor knocked their hips together.

Jacques caught Denise's arm, pulling her backwards and pointing to another office, which currently contained two angels - one with beautiful gold and black wings, who was perched casually on the edge of the desk, and a taller angel in a bluish-white dress that was seated behind the desk.

Denise made a noise of irritation and Jacques frowned at the taller angel before glancing at his wife. She narrowed her eyes, thoughtful, before grinning and dragging her husband into the huge office.

The taller angel's gaze snapped up to them as Vox and Alastor shuffled in, shutting the door behind them.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked the taller angel as the angel with black and gold wings raked his gaze over them curiously. "This is a private meeting." She stood, lifting her impressive wings, and she towered over the other occupants of the room.

"We seek an audience with the Archangel Gabriel," Denise said as Jacques glanced at the bookshelf behind them and casually plucked what appeared to be an old newspaper cutting from one of the shelves. He held it behind his back and returned his attention to his wife.

“That won’t be possible without an appointment,” said the tall angel angrily. “How did you get in here? Do you have authorisation? Where are your passes?”

“Left them at home,” said Denise drily. “Look, this is a matter of great urgency.”

“Then it should be taken through the proper channels,” said the tall angel with a scowl as she prowled towards them, clearly intending on ushering them out of the office.

“We tried that,” Denise protested. “We can’t request anything if we aren’t council members.”

“That isn’t my problem,” said the tall angel. “Please take your leave.”

“Except it *will* be your problem if you continue to ignore Roo’s rampage through Hell,” drawled Alastor.

The tall angel froze and stared at Alastor for a long moment. “How do you...?” She frowned, tilting her head as she looked carefully between Vox and Alastor. “...Have I seen you two before?”

“We’re new arrivals,” Vox said. He wasn’t lying. Technically.

The black and gold-winged angel huffed a laugh and winked at Vox before hopping off the desk and stretching in a manner that reminded both former demons of Lucifer.

“At ease, Sera,” he said in a smooth, rich voice before fixing the four lower angels with a sharp look. “You have my attention. Better start talking before security catches up.”

Vox blinked. *Gabriel.*

“Hell is *dying*,” Alastor said quickly. “Roo is causing misery and despair and souls are being destroyed. It won’t be long before she turns her attention to Heaven and then you’ll face the same fate.”

“You seem to know a lot about Hell,” Gabriel said with an easy smile and a dangerous look behind his eyes. “Now, why would that be?”

It was obvious that he knew why. Perhaps there was something in their souls that gave it away.

“What does it matter?” Denise asked. “People are *dying*. Aren’t angels supposed to be merciful? We need to help them.”

Vox and Alastor glanced at her in surprise before they realised that she didn’t know about the Exterminations. Their hearts sank as Sera pursed her lips and Gabriel’s smile grew a little strained.

“Yes, you’re quite right,” he said gently. “We are merciful. I will discuss this with the other Archangels and we will form a plan.”

“Liar,” growled Vox, startling Jacques and Denise and earning an icy look from both higher angels. “Lucifer has already begged you for help. You refused.”

Gabriel’s gaze darkened and the golden fox-like ears atop his head flattened as his smile grew wide and toothy. “Hell is his domain. Its people are under his charge. If any of his people are taken by the creature in Purgatory - a threat he has *known* about for millennia - then that is his concern. That includes his own daughter.”

“Except the creature is now free,” snarled Alastor. “And *everyone’s* lives are at stake.”

“And whose fault is that?” Gabriel snapped, wings flaring wide. “You *knew* that completing the trials would free her, yet you continued anyway. The blame lies with you and Lucifer for *allowing* you to compete. Your redemption may have been an unexpected twist, but Lucifer must suffer the consequences of his mistakes.” Gabriel gave them a cool look. “We are making plans to protect Heaven. Once she has finished with Hell, we will be ready.”

Vox clenched his fists. “So, you’re letting them die? All of them. For what? To teach Lucifer some sort of *lesson* because he wanted to save his own daughter from being *tortured*?”

“And you call demons evil,” Alastor sneered.

Sera bristled. “We are protecting our people, which is more than Lucifer has done for you and any of his family.”

“You were the ones to lose Lilith!” Vox roared. “She came to you for protection and you let that *monster* take her! Her death is on your hands!”

Sera clenched her fists but Gabriel’s eyes flashed in warning, still smiling like a Cheshire cat. “Opinionated little thing, aren’t you?” he purred, stalking towards Vox slowly. “You know, Hell’s a long way down from here. You should be careful not to *stumble*, like Lucifer did.”

In a flash, Alastor was by his lover’s side, baring his teeth at Gabriel and curling a protective hand around Vox’s arm. The shadows in the room seemed to grow a fraction taller and a familiar silhouette shifted against the far wall, surprising Vox. He hadn’t thought Alastor would retain his power over shadows in Heaven. It didn’t seem like a particularly heavenly sort of magic. Did that mean he had retained his own control over electricity...?

“Is that how bureaucracy works in Heaven?” Alastor snarled. “Someone says something you don’t like so you just give them a little *push* off the nearest cloud? Watch them perish in the next Extermination?”

“Heaven demands order,” Sera said righteously. “Or we, too, would devolve into chaos, like Hell. That is what separates us, what keeps this place functioning as a paradise for all.”

“That and the lies of how many souls you’ve slaughtered,” Vox growled. “How many you’ve *pushed*. People are allowed to be happy providing they do as they’re told and don’t ask questions. The moment someone steps out of line, you make them *Lucifer’s* problem. You can’t control a soul, so you dump them in Hell and then punish Lucifer for the very thing you *failed* to do.”

Denise and Jacques looked between Vox and Alastor and the two higher angels in horror, and Vox’s heart ached with sympathy for them. They hadn’t known just how cruel Heaven could be.

He was surprised when Alastor’s parents suddenly joined their sides, heads lifted in defiance.

“If you push them, you’ll have to push all of us,” Jacques said firmly as he clamped a hand over Alastor’s shoulder. “I won’t lose my son again.”

Alastor’s ears lowered a little and Vox could see the grief in his gaze even as he stood a fraction straighter in front of the higher angels.

“You won’t be *pushing* any of us,” snapped Denise as she wagged a finger at Gabriel. “This is your mess too. If you’d helped Lucifer when he begged you to, Roo wouldn’t be free. The souls in *your* care wouldn’t be in danger.”

“You aren’t in any danger,” Gabriel said calmly.

“Bullshit!” Denise hissed, startling the higher angel and making her husband grin as Alastor stared at her, stunned. “It took all the Archangels to lock her away last time. If you let all of Hell *die*, including Lucifer’s daughter, what makes you think Lucifer will help you? That’s if he even *survives*. ”

“We won’t need Lucifer,” Sera said in disdain. “We have three of four Archangels in Heaven, all of the Seraphim, and our *Father*. ”

Gabriel shifted uncomfortably. "...In theory," he murmured.

Sera glanced at him in confusion. "Excuse me?"

The Archangel licked his lips. "The Metatron hasn't heard word from our Father for a... uh... few decades now."

Sera's eyes widened. "...What?"

Gabriel rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "He's still watching. He always is. But... ah... we're just not entirely sure *where* He's watching from." Gabriel swallowed. "...Or how to contact Him."

Sera froze, fear suddenly filtering behind her gaze. "...Why were the Seraphim not informed?"

"We didn't want to worry you," Gabriel muttered. "There are some things we needed to keep from you in order to protect you. To protect the order of things."

Sera stared at him in horror. "...Then they are correct. Heaven is unprotected."

"Not entirely," Gabriel said. "We still have three Archangels and all of the Seraphim, as you said."

"You guys are the equivalent of the Sins, right?" Vox drawled, catching Sera's attention. "Turns out it was *super easy* for Roo to slaughter Leviathan. Barely an inconvenience at all, really."

Sera's face drained of colour as she looked at Gabriel desperately. "...Is that true?"

Gabriel was quiet for a few moments. "...This was precisely why we didn't want to reveal our Father's... vacation. There is no need to panic-"

"Oh, there very much is," purred Alastor as his silhouette - complete with a shadowy halo and a rather intimidating set of sharp wings - tittered to itself on the wall beside Sera. "Do you have any idea how much fear and fury and misery Roo can create? She'll tear your little paradise apart in seconds. She can *possess* you, mould you into her puppets, force you to inflict harm on those you pride yourself in protecting. She'll make this place worse than Hell. She'll have the Archangels in chains and you'll be forced to watch as all of your precious *winners* extinguish their own souls to stop the pain. Perhaps she'll make you destroy a few for fun..."

Sera stared at him for a long moment before casting her gaze to Gabriel. "We have to do something."

"Plans are being made-"

"*Real* plans!" Sera snapped. "Perhaps they are correct. Perhaps we *should* stop her while she is still in Hell. Prevent her from ever setting foot in Heaven."

Gabriel scowled as security - a goat-like angel and a llama-like angel - burst through the door with stun guns clasped in their hands.

"Finally," he growled before gesturing to the four lower angels. "Get them out of here. They are spreading lies to frighten the masses. Take them to the holding cells. I will deal with them later."

The goat- and llama-angels started towards Vox and Alastor.

Denise's ears made a peculiar movement, and her tail - Vox could actually *see* her little fluffy tail peeking out from under the waistband of her skirt, unlike Alastor, who kept his hidden -

puffed and flashed white, prompting Jacques to nudge both Vox and Alastor and gesture to his ears.

Alastor quickly covered his ears as Vox switched off his audio inputs and Jacques revealed the newspaper cutting he had been hiding as Denise began to sing. Alarmed, Alastor summoned his shadows and blocked his father's ears. Jacques smiled gratefully at him and as the other angels in the room succumbed to Denise's siren song, Jacques shoved the newspaper cutting towards the entranced security guards.

Their faces fell, expressions growing more and more horrified as Denise's song clouded their thoughts, and Vox tilted forwards curiously, wondering what was written on the paper that had both security guards looking so terrified.

He blinked as words and letters shifted about the page, some vanishing entirely and others being rearranged quickly to form new words and sentences. Some phrases - the ones the writer had intended - blurred, making them impossible to read and the new, shifting sentences became highlighted, making them stand out amidst the chaos of the page.

The Archangels hide secrets, read one sentence before it crumbled into individual letters and flew around the page. ***Heaven will fall. They cannot save us.***

Vox raised his eyebrows and flicked his gaze briefly to Jacques' face, which was pinched in concentration.

ROO will be our end. Watch them avert their eyes. Watch them hold their tongue. See how their smiles strain at the name. ROO will come for us. She will destroy us. She cannot be defeated. Spread the word before they catch you. Warn everyone. HURRY.

The sentences came thick and fast and the security guards' faces paled with fear. They remained rooted to the spot by Denise's song, but once she finished, they stared at Gabriel and Sera with wide eyes and took one step back, then another.

Vox turned his audio inputs on as Alastor recalled his shadows.

“Who’s Roo?” asked the llama-angel quietly.

Gabriel put a hand to his head and glanced sluggishly at Jacques and Denise before plastering on a false smile. “Now, there’s no need to worry about that, little one.”

The security guards gasped.

“Run,” whispered Jacques urgently and the security guards looked at him with wide eyes before galloping down the corridor.

“Shit,” growled Gabriel before he turned a vicious gaze upon the smirking Jacques and Denise. “You’re really starting to piss me off.”

“Good,” huffed Denise. “Perhaps it’ll encourage you to do something.”

“Better hurry,” drawled Jacques. “Or you might have a riot on your hands.”

Gabriel observed them for a moment, a calculating look in his eyes. His wings flared suddenly and he lurched forwards, startling Denise as he reached for her. Vox reacted instinctively, stepping in front of Alastor’s mother and discharging a few *thousand* volts into Gabriel’s chest.

Gabriel grimaced as he stumbled backwards and when Sera stared at him, shocked, Vox grabbed Denise and Jacques’ arms and sent a pulse of static into Alastor to encourage him to *run*.

They bolted from Sera’s office, ignoring Gabriel’s frustrated shout, and Vox ushered his little herd of deer down the stairs and into Heaven’s streets, not allowing them to stop until they were safely at Alastor’s parents’ house once more.

Chapter End Notes

I have written most of this chapter on my night shifts at work XD

We're on the home stretch now! Not far to the end!

Chapter 71: Justice Is A Dish Best Served Cold

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Excitement ran high as Vox and Alastor's family shared stories and drinks in the living room and by the time late evening rolled in, Alastor was settled comfortably against Vox's chest as they stretched out over the couch, Vox rubbing his lover's back as they chatted to Alastor's parents, who were cuddled together on the opposite loveseat.

"Wait, so they *stop* you from leaving Heaven?" Vox asked curiously. "Even demons can venture up to Heaven if they want to. They don't because there's no point, and, well... Heaven's guards are a little *stab-happy*." He tilted his head. "But you're making it sound as though you *can't* leave."

"We can't," said Alastor's father. "Winners aren't allowed down to Hell and they're certainly not allowed to visit Earth. The higher ups said it was because Hell was too vicious and deadly for winners, but now I'm quite certain that they don't let us visit because they don't want us to know about the atrocities the Archangels and Seraphim allow - like the Exterminations."

"Not that we haven't tried to escape," his mother scoffed and Alastor looked at her curiously. She clicked her tongue at him. "Oh, don't give me that look. Did you really think we just sat up here and *accepted* that our son had woken up in Hell? Do you think we didn't *try* to come visit you?"

Alastor blinked. He had never really thought about it. He had always assumed his parents would be disappointed in him for how he had turned out.

"We tried dozens of times," his father agreed. "Once you died, Heaven's public record of you stopped updating. We were desperate to find you. To see you again. But Heaven's guards wouldn't allow it."

Alastor's heart filled with warmth and his mother's gaze softened. "We missed you, dear."

"I missed you too," he managed, grateful when Vox held him tighter, offering silent support.

His father glanced at Vox. "What about you, son? Any of your family around here? Can we help you find them?"

Vox snorted and shook his head. "I know exactly where my parents are. Visited them only once since I died and they slammed the door in my face." He smiled bitterly. "Just like old times."

Alastor's mother raised her eyebrows in surprise as his father frowned.

"I know how that feels," said his father sympathetically and Vox smiled weakly.

"You wouldn't have known how that felt if you hadn't chosen to marry me," whispered Alastor's mother and his father frowned at her reproachfully and snaked an arm around her.

"Does it look like I regret my decision?" he asked firmly. "If I had followed my parents' wishes, I wouldn't have such a beautiful family now, would I?"

She melted against him and Alastor watched them contentedly, snuggling further into Vox and tucking his head beneath his chin. He curled an arm around his lover, smiling when Vox traced idle patterns over his spine.

Alastor rolled his shoulders with a quiet hum. He had never felt this *relaxed* before.

There was a soft *whoosh* and the sound of an empty mug skittering across the coffee table, and Alastor's world went dark for a moment as Vox made a muffled sound of alarm.

Vox fought off whatever was attacking him and Alastor lifted his head in surprise, watching as Vox grappled with a thick blanket of feathers.

No, not a blanket. *Wings. Alastor's wings.* Alastor's breath hitched and he swung the great appendages away from Vox's face with such speed that he rolled off the couch, dragging Vox with him.

Vox landed on top of him with a grunt, feathers flying in every direction and wings wedged awkwardly between the coffee table and the couch.

Alastor's parents tittered to themselves from the loveseat.

Vox propped himself up on his hands to stare at Alastor, and his eyes blew wide with admiration as he studied Alastor's new limbs.

The wings were a striking combination of fawn and chocolate and crimson, speckled with snowy spots and the odd black feather, and they were as soft as a young owl's feathers yet somehow strong and robust. Alastor immediately wrinkled his nose at their size and clumsiness, but Vox buried his fingers deep between the feathers and *oh*, that felt *wonderful...*

Alastor made a soft noise of approval and Vox thrust both hands into his wings greedily, and Alastor wanted *more*. He wanted Vox to touch every inch of his ridiculous, impractical wings. He wanted Vox to keep looking at him like that, with hunger burning in his gaze and his body arched so possessively over Alastor's. He wanted Vox to *ruin* him-

His mother cleared her throat.

Alastor shot upright and Vox toppled off him, catching himself using the coffee table, and Alastor's cheeks darkened as he heard the *speed* of Vox's fans.

He looked up at his parents in horror and they fought back amused smiles as they shook their heads and tutted in mock disapproval.

“In front of your poor, innocent mother,” his father said solemnly as he barely managed a frown at Alastor.

Heat raced up Alastor’s neck.

“Hardly appropriate, that sort of behaviour,” said his mother as she looked between Vox and Alastor with pursed lips.

Alastor covered his hot face with his hands, hiding from his parents’ gazes.

“You might be grown up now but I’m not averse to sending you to your room if I have to,” drawled his father and Vox snickered as Alastor hid his face a little more.

“Upstairs, second door on the left, spare sheets in the wardrobe if you need them,” hummed his mother, which didn’t help Alastor’s situation at all.

Vox chuckled and nudged Alastor playfully. Alastor shot him a long-suffering look.

“Don’t worry, son,” said his father with a grin. “I was the same way when I saw your mother’s wings. Couldn’t keep my hands off her.”

Alastor wrinkled his nose in disgust and Vox beamed like a child at Christmas, delighted by their teasing and subsequent torture of Alastor.

“We’re lucky guys,” Vox said, winking at Alastor’s father.

“Priviledged,” agreed his father with a smirk as his mother rolled her eyes and Alastor’s face radiated enough heat to qualify as a small sun.

“And on that note, I’m going to bed,” his mother scoffed. “It has been an eventful day for these old legs and I’d quite like to put them up and get some rest.” She stood and straightened out her skirt, casting Vox and Alastor a warm look. “Goodnight, dears.”

Alastor’s ears pricked up and his eyes slipped closed as his mother leaned down to kiss the top of his head. His heart warmed and his breath hitched and he watched her adoringly as she squeezed Vox’s shoulder affectionately on her way upstairs.

His father stretched and stood and Alastor rose to his feet as well, offering his hand for his father to shake as he had when they were still alive on Earth.

His father eyed his outstretched palm before cocking an eyebrow at Alastor and dragging him in for a tight, almost desperate hug.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” whispered his father as he nuzzled into Alastor’s ear. “We’re past handshakes.”

Alastor squeezed his eyes shut and pressed into his father’s broad chest, clutching at the back of his sweater.

“Your mother and I love you more than anything in this world. You know that, right?” whispered his father. “No matter what happens, no matter what you faced in Hell or Purgatory or on Earth, no matter what you’ve *done*... You will always have a home with us. We will always love you. We will always stand beside you.”

Alastor shivered and pressed his face into his father’s shoulder. “...I love you too, Dad. Both of you.”

He rubbed Alastor's back and flicked his gaze to Vox. "Same goes for you too, Vox. Anyone who takes care of my son is welcome in my house. You're a part of this family now, don't forget it."

Vox's eyes widened. "...Thank you... Sir."

Alastor's father's smile widened. "Good man." He leaned back to look at Alastor. "Have a good night. I'll see you both in the morning."

Alastor squeezed his father affectionately before releasing him and letting him head towards the stairs. He patted Vox's back on the way past and Vox grinned, tipping his head in acknowledgement before Alastor's father disappeared upstairs.

Vox turned to his lover with a soft look. "I fucking love your parents."

Alastor laughed, feeling lighter than he had in a long, long time. He glanced at his wings and shook them out curiously and Vox prowled towards him hungrily.

"I'd very much like to see the rest of you," he purred as he curled his fingers into Alastor's lapels and tugged him closer. Alastor moved willingly, humming when Vox's hands settled around his hips. "I want to see what other changes have been made to your body."

Alastor chuckled and slid two fingers up Vox's chest and under his bowtie, loosening it with a lazily smile. "I doubt I'm the only one with *changes*." He unfastened Vox's top button with one hand and traced a finger over his collarbone, where he could see circuit traces glowing a faint purple. *Interesting*. He pitched forwards, burying his nose into the column of Vox's throat and slipping his hands inside his tailcoat as he nipped Vox's neck. "Come to bed with me."

"How can I refuse an offer like that?" Vox purred as he wrapped a possessive hand around the base of a wing. Alastor immediately leaned into his touch.

In an efficient move, Vox swept Alastor off the floor, hooking his legs over his hips and nipping at his lips greedily. He didn't account for the added weight of Alastor's new wings however, and staggered forwards before both of them toppled onto the couch.

Vox snickered into Alastor's chest and Alastor found himself grinning as he held onto his beloved picture box.

"Shall we try that again?" he teased, rubbing Vox's back as the television dem- *angel* peppered a line of kisses over his stomach.

Vox seemed in no rush. He settled between Alastor's legs and kissed the insides of his thighs before pressing a devoted kiss to the slight tent in Alastor's crotch. He slipped his hands around Alastor's waist and nuzzled at his stomach and Alastor toyed idly with his lover's antennae as he watched, pulsing static into the ends and stroking the shafts slowly.

Finally, Vox propped his head on Alastor's stomach, smiling up at him warmly as he thumbed circles into his hips.

"I love you, Al," he whispered. "I love you more than I've ever loved anything before. You make me happy."

Alastor brushed his thumb over Vox's lips before grazing his fingers down the edge of his screen. "I love you too, my dear. I want you to be a part of my family."

Vox's gaze softened before he tilted his head and pressed a long kiss to Alastor's stomach. Alastor teased at the ports behind his head and Vox trailed a line of sweet kisses lower and lower until he reached the slight tent in Alastor's trousers. He nuzzled the area before brushing his lips against the soft fabric, and Alastor's eyes fluttered shut at the intimate gesture, still stroking his antennae and toying with his ports.

Vox slid his hands to Alastor's waistband as he kissed his dick through his trousers, and he untucked Alastor's shirt and slipped his fingers over bare skin, hands curling around his sides as he shifted to kiss Alastor's bare stomach instead.

He hitched Alastor's shirt higher, unbuttoning his waistcoat and settling more comfortably between his legs before pulling back to stare at the newly exposed skin.

His eyes widened a fraction and he hooked a finger around Alastor's waistband, exposing more of his right hip.

"You've got *spots*," Vox breathed, awed, and Alastor peered down at himself curiously, blinking at the sprinkling of white spots along his hips and sides, contrasting his darker skin and making him look rather fawn-like.

Vox began to kiss the spots, each and every one, and Alastor's heart pumped faster as he watched.

"Want to see you," Vox mumbled, nipping at his hip. "Want to see all of you."

Heat flared in Alastor's belly as Vox spread a possessive hand over his stomach. He nipped at another spot and Alastor curled his wings around his lover just as possessively.

"Upstairs," he growled as he hooked a finger beneath Vox's screen.

Vox swallowed, desire pooling in his gaze and he tugged Alastor to his feet, stealing a heated kiss from his mouth before Alastor chased him upstairs.

Once in the spare bedroom, Alastor pushed Vox onto the edge of the bed and straddled his lap, moaning softly when Vox fisted his shirt and dragged him in for an open-mouthed kiss. Alastor tore away from him a little breathlessly before stepping back and slowly removing his coat and waistcoat.

Vox's gaze was glued to him and when Alastor fluffed his feathers, Vox pulled him into his lap with a soft growl. He began unfastening Alastor's shirt but Alastor gently smacked his

hands away.

“Hands by your sides,” he purred, lips brushing Vox’s as he settled in his lover’s lap. “You may only touch me with your mouth.”

Vox’s eyes flashed with interest and he quickly latched onto Alastor’s neck, biting and sucking, and Alastor let out a soft mewl of encouragement as he slowly removed his own shirt and tie.

Vox leaned back, eyes roaming hungrily over his body and he immediately reached for Alastor’s hips.

Alastor gripped his wrists and pinned them to the mattress. “Ah-ah. Mouth only.”

There were more snowy spots dusting his shoulders and Vox mouthed hot, wet kisses over these, nipping and licking whenever the fancy struck him. He kissed along Alastor’s neck and nipped his jaw before burying his face into the large tuft of white fluff at his chest.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” Vox breathed and butterflies erupted in Alastor’s chest as Vox lapped at one of his nipples and took it between his teeth.

Carefully, Alastor released Vox’s wrists to untie his bowtie and as predicted, Vox’s hands flew straight to his waist, roaming greedily, squeezing, weaving through the line of brown fur at his stomach that led below his waistband.

Alastor noticed that whilst he was still slim, he didn’t look quite as emaciated as his demonic body had been, and Vox had obviously noticed this fact too, for he squeezed Alastor’s hips before sweeping a hand up to the ribs that were no longer visible.

Alastor let him explore for a few more seconds before summoning his shadows and coiling them around Vox’s wrists, tearing them away from his body. Vox whined softly as Alastor climbed off his lap and narrowed his eyes.

“You’re being very disobedient tonight,” he scolded gently and Vox swallowed and struggled a little against the shadows.

“Want to touch.”

“I’ve already told you that you may touch me using your mouth,” purred Alastor. “Forget the rules again and I’ll make you watch me pleasure myself.”

Vox’s eyes flashed with interest and for a moment, Alastor wasn’t sure if he would break the rules merely to see Alastor enact his promise. Finally, Vox’s fingers curled into the sheets and Alastor smiled, pleased.

He unzipped his trousers and toed off his shoes and socks before finally turning his back to Vox and sliding off his underwear. When he faced Vox once more, completely exposed, Vox’s eyes were wide and excited.

“There’s a stripe,” whispered Vox, “all the way down your spine from your neck to your tail. It’s dark, like the tips of your ears, and I want to kiss all the way up its length.”

Alastor’s smile softened and Vox’s gaze roamed over his front, a heavy exhale leaving him when he noticed Alastor’s half-mast cock. He licked his lips and met Alastor’s eyes for a moment before pushing off the bed and dropping to his knees before Alastor, hands restrained behind his back by Alastor’s shadows.

Alastor’s breath hitched as Vox dipped down to kiss his hoof, which was now black with white fur tapering to dark skin. He watched as Vox slowly kissed his way up his ankle, over his knee, nipping heatedly at his thigh before nuzzling at his cock. He kissed Alastor’s cock slowly, raising his heart-eyed gaze to Alastor’s face, and Alastor swallowed thickly as Vox kitten-licked at him in between feather-light kisses.

His dick hardened at Vox’s attention and his feathers fluffed enticingly, like a bird performing some sort of mating call.

“Needy little thing,” Alastor purred with a steadier voice than he anticipated as Vox lapped at him. “How desperate you look, kneeling at my feet.”

Sparks crackled between Vox’s antennae and Alastor could tell that he was enjoying himself. Alastor hummed curiously as he toyed with Vox’s crimped antenna. “Suck.”

Vox swallowed him eagerly, licking and sucking and mewling happily as Alastor caressed the damaged antenna. He sighed contentedly before smirking down at his lover and placing a hoof lightly upon the large tent in his trousers. Vox whimpered and rutted desperately against Alastor’s hoof.

Alastor watched him carefully. “How pathetic,” he drawled.

Vox stilled, looking up at Alastor uncertainly. Alastor brushed his fingers down the edge of his screen with a reassuring smile and Vox relaxed a fraction and continued humping Alastor’s hoof.

Alastor watched him for a few moments. “So desperate for the smallest scrap of attention,” he continued quietly. “You’ll suck my cock for even a hint of affection.”

Vox pulled off him with a small frown, looking unsure as he stilled his hips. He was silent for a moment and Alastor let him gather his thoughts.

“I don’t...” Vox began then trailed off, looking torn. He glanced down at Alastor’s hoof. “...I don’t think I like this.”

Alastor removed his hoof and freed Vox’s wrists, watching his lover wrap his arms around himself as he tended to do when he was feeling insecure. Alastor kneeled in front of him, noting how Vox wouldn’t quite meet his gaze.

He slid a finger beneath Vox's screen, forcing their eyes to meet. "You're safe," Alastor said softly. "You know I don't think of you like that. You know I'll never think of you like that. It was just a game. We don't have to play."

Vox searched his face for a long moment before slotting his fingers between Alastor's and frowning at their linked hands. "Usually when people say that sort of shit to me, they mean it."

"I know," Alastor murmured. "I know you still see yourself that way sometimes. I want to change that. I want those words to remind you of pleasure rather than pain or insecurity."

Vox looked at him for a little while before nodding slowly. "...I'd like that." He hesitated. "You'll stop if I ask?"

Alastor cupped his screen between both palms. "Always. It's just a game, remember? No matter what I say, I love you with all of my heart, my dear."

Vox nodded slowly and Alastor kissed the top of an antenna before standing and stroking himself to semi-hardness again. He cocked an eyebrow at Vox. "I will allow you *one* touch with your hands before I restrain you again. Choose wisely."

Vox brightened and sprung to his feet. He stepped behind Alastor, snaked his arms around his stomach and chest, and kissed down the stripe at his spine, starting at his neck and ending at his fluffy tail. Alastor chuckled and leaned into his lover before turning in his arms and kissing his lips.

"Kneel," he ordered quietly and Vox did, gaze never leaving Alastor's even as his hands were tied behind his back by shadows.

Alastor admired him for a few moments; his trusting gaze and the curious tilt of his head. He stroked his own cock slowly before pressing the head against Vox's lips and Vox opened his mouth obediently.

“Good boy,” Alastor praised and there was a spark of excitement behind Vox’s eyes as he began to suck and lick at Alastor once more.

Alastor hummed in approval as he curled his fingers around the shaft of an antenna. “Look at you. Swallowing me down like a common *whore*.” He pressed his hoof on Vox’s cock again. “Have you no shame?”

Vox rubbed himself against Alastor’s hoof.

“How *gorgeous* you look,” whispered Alastor and Vox glanced up at him in surprise as Alastor smiled and pressed his hoof a little harder against Vox’s dick. Vox groaned quietly and rolled his hips deeper.

“Pathetic little picturebox,” Alastor drawled. “Desperate to be used if it’ll earn him attention.” He gripped the back of Vox’s neck. “It doesn’t even matter *whose* attention he gets.”

He fucked into Vox’s mouth, hard and deep before suddenly pulling out.

Vox panted and Alastor pushed his thumb between Vox’s lips. “Beautiful.”

Again, Vox blinked up at him, surprised by the compliment. Alastor smirked and removed his thumb from Vox’s mouth to wrap his fingers around his throat. Vox gasped.

“If you want attention, Vox, I can give you attention.” He squeezed Vox’s throat a fraction harder. “I’m the only one you’re allowed to beg for attention from, understand? You’re *mine*.”

Vox’s fans flipped on and he nodded as best as he was able to.

“I get to use you as I please,” Alastor purred.

Again, Vox nodded.

“So eager to be *wanted*, ” drawled Alastor. “You’ll do anything I say, won’t you? Get on your hands and knees.”

Vox’s eyes widened before he obeyed without protest. Alastor sank behind him and slid his trousers off roughly, then had to take a moment to admire the circuit traces etched into Vox’s greyish-blue skin, which were glowing a faint purple.

The scars from Hell were still present, but they were silver and shiny, glinting prettily under the bedroom lights. Alastor’s scars also remained, but they were merely pale marks painting his skin, like normal scars.

Vox was stunning.

He pressed a kiss to the dip of Vox’s spine, hands settling possessively around his waist.

Vox stilled, pulsing a burst of curious static through Alastor. Alastor grinned and spat onto Vox’s hole before ramming two fingers into him.

Vox gasped and jerked forwards and Alastor grabbed his shoulder and pinned him to the floor. He arched his wings around his lover possessively as he fingered him and Vox fisted the carpet.

“The humiliation you’ll put yourself through for the briefest moment of affection,” Alastor teased and Vox shuddered. “Affection from your enemy, no less.”

Sparks jumped between Vox’s antennae and Alastor grinned. He’d struck gold with that little comment.

Finally, Vox relaxed. “Hey, I’m not the one who’s entirely naked with my fingers in another guy’s ass. If anyone’s desperate here, I’d say it was *you*.”

Alastor’s grin widened. “You insolent little wretch,” he growled as he gripped Vox’s throat and stomach and pulled him against his lap. He rutted against Vox’s ass and jerked his cock roughly as he squeezed his throat, and Vox groaned and dug his fingers into Alastor’s thighs.

“Strip,” Alastor hissed against the back of his screen.

Vox scoffed. “Why should I, *old pal*?”

Alastor’s tail wiggled excitedly and he bit down on Vox’s shoulder. Vox gasped and rocked back against his cock, needy and hopeful.

“Because I’m going to fuck you and I want to see you sweat and tremble and arch for me,” growled Alastor. “So take your clothes off before I tear them from you.”

“What makes you think I’d let my enemy fuck me?” Vox asked even as he unbuttoned his shirt.

“Because you’re obsessed with me,” Alastor murmured as he nipped Vox’s shoulder again and pumped his dick. “Because you’re curious. Because you’re greedy. Because you want to have something that no one else has had before.”

Alastor paused and frowned as he thought about that last sentence.

Vox *wasn’t* the only one who’d had him...

Vox sensed his sudden dip in mood and figured out where his thoughts lay. He reached behind Alastor and gripped his tail, pulling slightly.

“Or maybe I want you to fucking *ruin* me,” Vox growled. “Maybe I’m tired of fighting and I’m finally ready to surrender. Maybe I want you to show me why radio is better than television.”

Alastor arched an eyebrow in amusement as he stilled. “...Is that an admission of defeat, my dear?”

Vox barked out a laugh and winked at him. “Depends how well you fuck me.”

Alastor grinned and kissed the bruise forming on his shoulder. “Strip for me, my love. I want to see you.”

Vox followed Alastor’s orders and Alastor hooked his chin over Vox’s shoulder, admiring the circuit traces that stretched over every inch of skin, all the way to his ankles. They glowed a deep violet now and Alastor was beginning to recognise the colour as arousal. The lights at his hips were still there and Alastor pressed his favourite one, stroking Vox’s cock lazily as his skin grew transparent.

Alastor hummed happily and followed the path of a wire through Vox’s stomach and up to his chest with a finger. He circled the finger around Vox’s steadily pumping heart and Vox leaned back against him as Alastor’s wings tightened around them both. Vox sighed and tangled his fingers into Alastor’s feathers.

“Changed my mind,” he mumbled. “I like this.”

Alastor chuckled and pressed a kiss to Vox’s neck before he caught sight of a new light on Vox’s hip - a pale blue one that flashed slowly. Vox followed Alastor’s line of sight and raised his eyebrows. “Newly installed update.” He seemed surprised.

They glanced at each other before Alastor gingerly tapped it.

Two huge, striking wings flickered into view either side of Alastor. They were an ocean blue with cyan circuit traces and they were more akin to fairy wings than feathered bird wings. Alastor lost his breath for a moment and Vox stared at them, stunned, before grinning widely.

“*Awesome.*”

Alastor touched one gently and the wing flickered, his fingers phasing straight through.

Vox’s face fell. “Wait, that’s not fair.”

Alastor glanced at him curiously.

Vox pursed his lips as he attempted to touch the wings, only for his fingers to phase through as well. “Oh, come on! I get wings and I can’t even feel anything through them because they’re fucking *holographs*? What kind of sick joke is that?”

Alastor touched the light and the wings disappeared. The flashing stopped.

Vox pouted and Alastor nuzzled the back of his screen. “I’m starting to think Heaven has a strange sense of humour. They made me look *more* like helpless prey and gave you wings that no one can touch...”

“And I thought Hell was sadistic,” grumbled Vox before he glanced at Alastor’s wings and his expression softened. “At least I can touch these.” He fisted Alastor’s wings and pulled them tighter around him.

“Hm... Keeping your enemies close?” Alastor teased as he snuggled against Vox’s back, resuming his lazy stroking of his cock.

“Still waiting for that fucking you promised. Starting to think you’re all bark and no bite.”

Alastor nipped his bruised shoulder and Vox hissed.

“Brat,” Alastor growled. “On the bed. Hands and knees.”

“What’s wrong with the floor?”

“I’m *old*,” Alastor griped before he smacked Vox’s ass for laughing.

“Is that why you have the cane?” Vox teased and Alastor smacked him again before dragging him to his feet and throwing him onto the bed.

“Careful. Don’t exert yourself too much,” Vox snickered. “Did you take your vitamins with your pudding cup earlier?”

Alastor rolled his eyes and sat behind Vox, pushing two fingers into him and casting his gaze to the bedside table then freezing as he realised there was a problem.

“Ah,” he said, cheeks heating.

Vox grinned wickedly at him. “Performance issues, old man?”

Alastor glanced at him sheepishly and removed his fingers from Vox’s hole. “...Not exactly.”

Vox’s expression grew a fraction worried. “Al?”

“No lube,” Alastor said solemnly.

Vox blinked in confusion. "...What?"

Alastor gestured around the bedroom. "Spare room."

Vox looked around the room for a moment, uncomprehending, before the epiphany flashed across his expression and he held it together for all of four seconds before bursting into laughter and falling onto his back.

Alastor gazed at him adoringly, drinking in the sound of his joy and the sight of his components and organs beneath his track-engraved transparent skin. Damn, he was incredible. Alastor was a lucky man.

He crawled on top of Vox with a smile and Vox immediately wrapped his arms around him, carding his fingers through his new curls.

"Heaven sucks," Vox snickered and Alastor cuddled into him with a hum of agreement.

Vox kissed the tip of an ear. "Show me your trueform," he whispered. "I want to see if it looks different now you're an angel."

Alastor nuzzled Vox's chest before closing his eyes and concentrating on his other form. He felt himself shift and change, but he felt as though he was getting... smaller.

Vox sucked in a sharp breath. "Alastor," he breathed.

Alastor opened his eyes and glanced down at himself and he gasped, shooting upright as he inspected his hands and body and legs and-

"You're..." Vox started, unable to finish.

“...Human,” Alastor whispered.

It suddenly made sense why so many angels looked human. They *chose* to look like that because, in Heaven, one’s Earthen appearance *was* their trueform.

Vox stared at Alastor for a long moment before closing his eyes in concentration and Alastor’s breath hitched at the familiar mismatched eyes that reopened.

Vox glanced down at himself. “Shit,” he said.

Alastor couldn’t help himself. He slid into Vox’s lap and kissed his lips over and over until Vox joined the programme and kissed him just as eagerly. Their hands roamed over hot skin and Vox pulled Alastor flush against him as Alastor’s fingers weaved into his hair and Vox’s hand wrapped around both of their cocks.

Alastor rutted desperately against Vox, tongues sliding together as they clutched at each other, and Alastor could feel his pleasure building slowly as Vox touched every inch of him, frantic and greedy and *possessive*.

He suddenly wanted to *taste* Vox.

He tore away from Vox, ignoring his pitiful whine, and he wrapped his lips around his lover’s weeping cock and sucked and licked and moaned as he stroked himself, and Vox fisted his curls and came with a cry of Alastor’s name.

Alastor swallowed his treat and Vox stared at him with round, shocked eyes before Alastor grinned and straddled his lover, wrapping a hand around his throat.

“Stay there, *old pal*,” he purred and after a few more strokes, Alastor held onto the headboard and nudged his throbbing cock between Vox’s very human lips.

Vox opened his mouth enthusiastically and Alastor stroked himself to climax, watching in smug satisfaction as Vox licked up every last drop of his release.

He rolled off Vox and cuddled into his side with a sigh, smiling when Vox immediately rolled over and gathered him into his chest. He tangled his legs with Vox's and tucked his head under his chin.

"Colour?" Alastor asked after a few moments of silence. His voice sounded strange without his usual filters.

Vox chuckled and held Alastor tighter. "The brightest green you can picture."

Alastor smiled contentedly and tucked them both under the covers. After a couple of minutes, there was a soft click of fingers and a *giggle*.

Vox pressed something into Alastor's palm under the covers.

It felt a lot like a tube of lube.

"You could have summoned some, dipshit."

Alastor bit back a laugh and fell asleep wrapped in the arms of the man he loved, grasping a tube of lube between his fingers

Breakfast was wonderful because Alastor's mother cooked it. His father helped but he was relegated to toast and coffee duties. It wasn't that his father *couldn't* cook, it was just that his mother was better.

Alastor and Vox washed up, stealing sweet kisses whenever they passed one another, neither of them able to keep their hands off each other's human forms. Alastor's parents grinned knowingly and went about their morning routine, pretending they hadn't noticed their son pressing Vox against one of the counters and hooking a finger around his square halo, eliciting a quiet moan from him.

There was a heavy knock on the door.

Alastor's father stilled, frowning at the door, and his mother glanced warily at him, neither of them having expected any visitors.

Alastor and Vox lingered curiously in the kitchen doorway, watching Jacques open the front door a crack. Immediately, his ears flattened and his antlers grew a couple of inches.

"My sources tell me you're hiding demons," said a deep voice with an old accent.

Jacques stood straighter, blocking the doorway with his broad shoulders. "No demons here," he said politely. "Just me and my family."

"Then I'm sure you won't mind us taking a look around?"

"Actually, I do," Jacques said firmly. "You got a warrant?"

There was a condescending chuckle. "I'm an Archangel. I don't need a warrant. Step aside."

Jacques' wings popped into existence, huge and muscular and bursting with black, red, and white feathers. "This is my home," he growled. "I don't appreciate strangers barging in and *threatening* my family."

“Now, I’m hardly a stranger. And I don’t appreciate insignificant souls putting *my* home, *Heaven*, in danger. Move before I restrain you for obstructing my investigation.”

Jacques planted himself more firmly in the doorway, growling softly as his antlers grew taller and wider.

He was suddenly blasted backwards into the far wall and he slumped onto the floor with a pained groan as three angels pushed into the house.

Denise ran to her husband’s side and bared her teeth at the intruders, fur bristling and ears flat, and Alastor felt something furious and protective stirring in his chest as his father rubbed the back of his head.

Alastor’s antlers grew taller and the shadows in the room seemed to grow darker, closing in as his silhouette leapt angrily from wall to wall, silently hissing at the three arrogant angels invading his parents’ home. Beside him, electricity crackled over Vox’s frame as he, too, gritted his teeth at the sheer pomposity of the intruders.

The smaller angel - the one with black and silver wings with an outfit that looked rather similar to Lucifer’s but in silver - smiled tightly at Vox and Alastor and clasped his hands together. “Ah, there you are. Guards, restrain them and place them with their friend.”

Friend?

The two guards - two very large, bulky rhino- and bison-like angels shuffled towards them, angelic swords at their hips.

“They aren’t demons, you arrogant piece of shit,” snapped Denise as she helped her husband to his feet. “Don’t you *dare* lay a hand on them.”

“Once a demon, always a demon,” said the smaller angel in a bored tone. “We’ve dealt with their kind before. They always revert back to their true nature.” He curled his lip in disgust.

“Like *dogs*. ”

Denise blinked and Jacques snarled, flaring his wings once more. “Listen here, Michael-”

The smaller angel, Michael, held his hand up dismissively. “No, I don’t think I will. Guards, restrain them so that we may put them back where they belong.”

Jacques flared his nostrils like a stag in rut and marched forwards, grabbing the bison angel’s shoulder and jerking him backwards before he could reach for Vox. The bison-like angel turned quickly and headbutted him, breaking an antler and leaving a blossoming red mark on his forehead that had Jacques staggering backwards, looking dazed.

Outraged, Alastor morphed into a less human form and summoned his shadows and they coiled around the two guards like great boa constrictors, squeezing and choking them and suspending them off the floor as a television-headed Vox lurched forwards and poured electricity into both angels.

They screamed and writhed uselessly and Alastor grinned at their struggling.

Michael suddenly appeared behind Vox and Alastor, giving them no time to react as he clicked his fingers and two heavy, silver collars appeared around their necks. They were engraved with runes and sigils and Vox and Alastor suddenly lost the ability to utilise their powers. They tugged frantically at the collars, eyes growing wide, and the bison and rhino-angels scrambled to their feet, panting as they whirled both former demons around and placed handcuffs around their wrists - these also bearing similar sigils.

“Get your hands off my boys!” Denise roared and she sang exactly two notes before Michael vanished and appeared in front of her and struck her so hard across the face that she tumbled to her hands and knees.

Alastor fought against his bindings, dials swinging in his eyes as he snarled and bared his teeth and threw his antlers around, aiming for the bison-guard restraining him.

“I was warned about your siren song,” Michael said boredly and when Denise tried again, he booted her stomach, winding her.

Alastor thrashed wildly as Jacques crawled over to his wife and curled over her protectively, still dazed and blood trickling from his broken antler as the large red mark on his head began to purple.

“Take the demons,” Michael said in distaste. “I want them out of Heaven.”

“They’ll *die*,” Denise said, voice cracking with pain. “Roo will kill them. *Please*, Michael. They aren’t demons. They were redeemed. They’re *good* people.”

Michael scoffed and glanced over at Vox and Alastor in disgust. “*Good*? No. Let me tell you exactly what they are. They’re bad men who went to Hell because they deserved it. Then, they decided they didn’t like Hell so they did a few good deeds, changed how they see themselves and the people around them, maybe even *convinced themselves* that they had become better people. Then they got themselves killed and it turns out they had done *just enough* to earn a spot in Heaven.”

Michael sneered at them. “It’s always the same story. The thing is, once they get up here, they start to relax. Start slipping back into their old ways. And since *murder* isn’t exactly rampant up here like it is in Hell, they never *Fall*. They never wake up in Hell again because everyone is too nice to give them what they deserve.” Michael’s sharp gaze landed on Denise. “So, that’s where *I* come in. I’m one of the guardians of Heaven. The Archangel of Justice. The system glitches and decides to throw up a bit of mould and *rot* and I’m the one who cleans it up and *discards* it into the abyss.”

He smiled at Denise and Jacques with too many teeth. “Unfortunately, that abyss is rather *broken*, so plans have changed a little. If you’d like to stay in this lovely home of yours, I suggest you keep your mouth *shut* and let me do my job.”

He made a quick gesture with his fingers and the guards herded Vox and Alastor towards the door.

Jacques and Denise glanced at each other before struggling to their feet and Alastor's heart sank with dread.

"No," he whispered before they had a chance to say anything. "Mom, Dad, don't."

They frowned at him before lifting their chins defiantly.

"I won't be torn away from my son again," Denise said. "I lost him once and I thought I'd never see him again. If you think I'm going to throw away this second chance, then you're stupider than you look."

Michael narrowed his eyes and Alastor shook his head desperately, even as he was shoved towards a black van heavily engraved with symbols neither Vox nor Alastor could decipher.

"No," Alastor begged. "No, don't do this."

"Wherever he goes, we go with him," Jacques said, subtly using his wife's shoulder for support. "We won't lose him again."

"No! They don't mean it," Alastor said frantically. "Don't listen to them! They... They don't understand. They don't know what Hell's like. They... They don't know what *Roo* is like. Let them stay. Protect them, *please*. They don't deserve to face that sort of misery and suffering!"

Michael glanced at him coolly before raking his gaze over Jacques and Denise. "You are fundamentally *good* people. You must stay here."

Alastor closed his eyes in relief as he was tossed into the van. He watched a calculating spark enter his mother's eyes as her hand disappeared behind the front door and, in a flash, she impaled Michael's eyeball with the keys.

He howled in agony and Jacques snatched the small sword from Michael's hip, gripped his wrist, and stabbed the blade through his palm. Again, Michael cried out in pain and quickly removed the sword from his hand.

He blinked and his eye repaired itself but the wound in his hand was inflicted by an angelic weapon and didn't heal. He cradled his palm to his chest and glowered furiously at Jacques and Denise.

"If that isn't enough to get us into Hell, we'll make sure to ram that blade through your heart next time," Denise growled.

Michael stared at them for a few seconds before his fingers closed around their throats, choking them. They struggled against him and Alastor and Vox scrambled towards them, only to be shoved back into the van by the guards.

"You aren't worth my time," Michael snarled before he threw them both into the van and slammed the doors shut, cloaking the family in darkness.

"Idiots!" Alastor snarled as Vox's screen provided just enough light for him to see his parents' exhausted faces. "*Why?* Why would you do that? You were *safe* here! I always knew you were safe and happy here! Now... Now you've thrown it all away! Don't you understand? She'll *kill* us and she'll make it slow and painful and you'll *suffer*, and- and-" He shook his head in frustration. "At least in Heaven, you had a *chance* to survive." Tears prickled his eyes. "Why? Why condemn yourselves to pain and torture?"

Jacques leaned tiredly against the wall of the van. "Because we love you. Because we'd never forgive ourselves if we let you face all of that alone. Because you're our son, no matter how old you get, and it's our job to be there for you when you need support." Jacques looked up at him, eyes a little misty. "We've failed that last part for far too many years. It's time we start being the parents you deserve."

Alastor's eyes widened as a tear rolled down his mother's cheek. "Oh, Alastor... How could we ever be truly happy in Heaven when you aren't with us? Knowing that you were in Hell, knowing the sorts of people down there, the things you'd be up against..." She looked at her husband, more tears rolling down her cheeks. "Knowing what you went through the night we died, knowing you had to face it all alone..." A choked sob left her as she wiped her eyes on

her sleeve. “Alastor, this has never felt like Heaven to us. It has always been a barrier stopping us from seeing you.”

Alastor’s breath hitched and, with his wrists and neck bound, he staggered towards them and squeezed between them, exhaling shakily as they curled around him protectively, his mother kissing his cheek as his father held them all together and nuzzled into his hair.

He lifted his gaze to Vox and found his lover smiling tenderly at him, obviously happy for him, and Alastor's heart simultaneously clenched and warmed because Vox had never had this. He had never had this sort of love from his parents and yet he was *pleased* for Alastor rather than jealous or uncomfortable.

A small, grateful smile touched Alastor’s lips as Vox remained silent, letting Alastor bask in his parents’ affection, and Alastor melted between them and clutched at them tightly as he allowed himself to shed a tear for what he had lost in life and what his parents had given up for him now.

“You have always been the best parents I could ask for,” Alastor whispered. “You didn’t *fail* at anything, you never left me alone... You were *taken* from me.” He leaned into his father. “You protected me. You gave me a chance to escape. If anything, I... *I failed you*. I should have stayed and fought. Maybe... Maybe if I hadn’t been such a coward, you would have lived longer. At least Dad would have.”

Jacques growled softly and kissed his son’s head, rubbing his back. “Son, you were traumatised and in pain. I’ll never forget the way you looked at me that night, the fear and agony and-” He cut himself off and held Alastor tighter. “I needed you to run. I needed you to get away from them. I didn’t want you to come back and fight because I didn’t want them touching you again. I needed you to escape and be *safe* because I’d just found your mother in a pool of her own blood and... and you were the only thing I had left. It’s my job to protect you and I... That night, I failed. I couldn’t protect you, but I could give you the chance to escape them.”

“You *died*,” Alastor whined. “I let you die.”

“It’s my job to protect you,” Jacques repeated firmly as he pressed another kiss to Alastor’s head. “At any and all costs. I failed your mother. I failed you. At least I could save your life.”

“You didn’t fail me, darling,” Denise whispered and Jacques shook his head bitterly and held his wife and son closer.

“I should have been there. I should have been with my family instead of going to that damn bar to meet Roger.” He scowled and kissed them both.

“Stop that,” huffed Denise as she leaned into her husband. “There’s no way you could have known what would happen.” She squeezed Alastor. “We have him back now. We have our son back and that’s all that matters.”

“It’ll be a short celebration,” Alastor whispered bitterly. “Roo has infected every inch of Hell. It won’t be long before…” He trailed off and his mother nuzzled his cheek.

“Then we’ll make the most of every *second* we have left with you.”

Alastor closed his eyes, hiding the tears in them, but his mother wiped them away and his father rubbed his back and nuzzled his ear and Alastor let out a quiet sob. He had forgotten how much his parents loved him. He had forgotten how protective they were, how *understanding*.

A piece of his heart that he had forgotten was broken suddenly healed itself and Alastor couldn’t *breathe*. It was all too much. Oh, how he had *missed* his parents. How empty he had been without them.

...Perhaps not *entirely* empty. Vox had been there. They had certainly faced their share of tragedies and misunderstandings but Vox had been a lighthouse in a sea of darkness when Alastor had first met him.

And to think, Alastor had been about to deliver Vox to Roo without a second thought. If it hadn’t been for his silhouette misbehaving...

He felt his silhouette leaning against the bars of its cage. The warded cuffs and collar were preventing him from opening the door and it seemed to understand that, waiting patiently to be allowed out once more. He pulsed affection into it and received a burst of affection from it in return.

He still didn't fully understand what it was or how it worked, but he found that he no longer cared. It was part of him, yet seemed to have its own mind, and after being without it for twenty months in Purgatory, he decided that he enjoyed having it.

He relaxed between his parents. He might be in a heavily warded van on his way to being dumped into a nightmarish Hell, but he was surrounded by family - by his parents and Vox and his silhouette. Perhaps he would even get to see Rosie and Velvette and Charlie again.

He'd like that.

"You have parentssss in Heaven?"

Alastor and his parents startled and Vox's screen brightened as he swung his head around ninety degrees to the darkest corner of the van.

Sir Pentious squinted against the bright light, arms and neck bound in the same way as Alastor and Vox. "Mr. Vox! It *iss* you!" He frowned. "Last time I *ssaw* you, you told me to kill myself."

Vox blinked. "Uh... sorry?"

Pentious waved a hand dismissively. "Doesn't matter. Joining that hotel was the best decision I was ever forced to make! I met the princessss and she gave me a chance to redeem myself and she believed in me and I made so many new friendss and- Look! I was actually redeemed! Can you believe it? Alastor and I even became buddies, right Alastor?"

Alastor smiled tightly and hummed.

His mother elbowed him but Pentious didn't seem to notice his scepticism and lifted his chin at Vox. "Turnsss out that I don't need to join the Vees because *I* made my own team of badasssss, Exorcist-fighting heroes and *we* aren't dicks to people who aren't as cool as us." His tongue flicked out of his mouth like an agitated snake as he crossed his arms.

Vox shared a glance with a pained-looking Alastor, clearly biting back a laugh. He managed to wrangle his expression into one of solemn defeat and tipped his head gracefully.

"You're right," Vox admitted. "I was a bit of a dick."

"A *huge* dick," Pentious huffed.

Vox licked his lips, beginning to lose the fight against the smile threatening to spread over his features. "Right. I'm sorry, Pentious. But I'm glad you found happiness in Heaven. You deserve it. I saw you sacrifice yourself to save the hotel. It was very noble of you."

"It wasss," agreed Pentious before he ducked his head sheepishly. "Although... I wouldn't exactly say I found happiness in *Heaven*, per se. Emily has been lovely, don't get me wrong, and she's been sssso eager to show me around and introduce me to new people, but uh... the other higher angels don't seem to like me all that much." He gestured around the van. "Case in point." He laughed awkwardly then grimaced.

Suddenly, he frowned. "The Archangels are the worst. They sssay they've done this before. That ssssinners get redeemed all the time and then they're 'cleaned up' and sent back to Hell. They say the only reason I sssstayed as long as I did was because I was Emily's little *pet*. But Emily took a trip with Sera last night and the Archangels found out about it and... well, I guesssss they grabbed the chance to finally dump me back into Hell."

Denise made a sound of sympathy but Pentious tilted his head. "The thing I don't understand is, if they've done this to other redeemed ssssinners, how come we never heard about it in Hell? Charlie clearly doesn't know other people have been redeemed and Lucifer didn't believe they could until I was. And everyone in Hell dismisssssed Charlie's ideas too. So... where are all these redeemed sinners that keep getting thrown back into Hell? I haven't sssseen any angels walking around Hell. Well, other than Vaggie and Lucifer."

That... That was a good point, actually. Alastor frowned in confusion. Michael had said he had 'cleaned up' many redeemed sinners, but where had they gone? Why had Hell not heard of them?

"Another thing I find weird is how *calm* all the Archangels are about Roo," said Sir Pentious, scratching his head despite his bound wrists. "Emily told me about her, about her progressss in Hell. She sssneaks me down there all the time despite the Archangels' wishes, but recently she's forbidden it. She told me about The Root Of All Evil and what she's doing in Hell and Emily's been working tirelessly to find a way to retrap her, begging the Archangels alongside Lucifer to lock her up, but they insissst that Heaven is safe. I don't understand how they can be so sure."

Alastor scowled. Quite the conundrum. Gabriel had mentioned that God was absent, so why were the Archangels so certain that Roo couldn't touch them?

"The abyss is broken," Vox said slowly, repeating Michael's earlier words. His eyes widened. "...He wasn't talking about Hell."

Alastor glanced at him, confused, before icy dread struck his chest. "Plans have changed," he echoed quietly as he met Vox's gaze. "They weren't sending redeemed sinners back to Hell."

"They were sending them to Purgatory," Vox breathed in horror. "Like *gifts*."

"They think it'll be enough to protect them. To *save* Heaven," Alastor whispered. "They're not throwing us into Hell, they're offering us to Roo as sacrifices to *appease* her."

"Did they make a fucking *deal* with her?" Vox asked in disgust. "To stop her from targeting winners while she was trapped in Purgatory? Is that why there were so many more demons and humans there?"

"It won't work," Alastor muttered, shaking his head. "They don't realise how powerful she's become. How powerful they've *helped* her to become. They kept her locked up like an

animal and thought that feeding her *treats* would tame her. That it would make them her master. *That's* the real reason they wouldn't help Lucifer."

"Charlie and Lilith were the biggest treats she'd had," Vox growled.

"And they made sure she knew that they wouldn't help Lucifer," Alastor said angrily. "They think she'll stop at Earth. They think she won't touch them because they *fed* her, *willingly*."

"Shit," breathed Vox as his antennae sparked with fear. Pentious looked between them in confusion.

"What?" he asked worriedly and Alastor clenched his fists.

"Michael's going to deliver us directly to her."

Chapter End Notes

Warning: spicy part in first section

I was very tempted to separate Alastor and his parents, but I did promise you guys a happy ending... ;)

Chapter 72: Family Squabbles

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“There must be something we can do,” Denise said desperately. “We can’t just... give up. We can’t just let them hand us over to her.”

Alastor looked around the dark, empty van in frustration. Suddenly, the van rattled as though it had hit a series of potholes and there was a weightless feeling in Alastor’s stomach for a few moments before the tyres hit a very bumpy road, and Alastor suspected they were no longer in Heaven.

He glowered at the cuffs around his wrists and his silhouette tapped at the bars of its cage worriedly.

His brows furrowed as a thought came to him and he clicked his tongue in irritation. “If I wasn’t wearing these blasted restraints, I might be able to contact the hotel.”

Vox stared at him for a long moment. “...What if we damage the sigils instead? Would you be able to contact the hotel?”

Alastor glanced at the symbols etched into the cuffs and nodded.

Vox tensed the chain between his own cuffs and turned to Alastor, rubbing the chain over the symbols until they wore away or became unrecognisable. He repeated the process for the collar at Alastor’s neck and Alastor felt the binding magic fade away.

He released his silhouette, its frown the only part of it visible amidst the darkness of the van.

“Get help,” Alastor ordered. “Find Charlie or Lucifer and show them where we are. Get them to stop the van before Michael finds Roo.”

The silhouette nodded and disappeared through the crack between the doors.

Charlie drew her knees to her chest, a hollow feeling in her stomach.

Alastor was dead. Vox was dead. Sixty-three percent of Hell was *dead*.

There was no way to stop Roo. No way to save the sinners or the Hellborn. Everyone would die at her hands. She would torture them first - mentally and physically - and then she would destroy them, until there was no one left.

Vaggie wrapped an arm around her, offering what little comfort she could. “We’ll figure it out,” she whispered.

Charlie gave her a weary look and her shoulders slumped.

Nifty stared numbly at a roach that weaved its way through the fibres of the rug she was sitting on. She hadn’t spoken a word since her chain had snapped. Hadn’t done much of *anything* since Alastor had died. She hadn’t eaten and as far as Charlie was aware, she hadn’t slept either.

Husk had been excited at feeling his own contract end, and he had hugged Angel and revealed his freedom and Angel had celebrated with him since he, too, had been released from his contract recently.

And then Rosie and Velvette had burst into the hotel a few hours later, tears streaming down their faces as they carried the mangled, barely-recognisable remains of Vox and Alastor, and, well...

...It suddenly made sense to Charlie why Alastor's silhouette had vanished from her room with a horrified expression.

After that, Husk wasn't so ecstatic about his newfound freedom and Charlie was even more despairing at the severance of her deal with Alastor.

He was well and truly *gone*. Forever.

And soon, everyone in Hell would join him.

She hadn't seen her father in *weeks*. He had been to and fro Heaven like a yo-yo, bargaining with the other Archangels and Seraphim, *begging* them to listen, pleading for their help, and when they dismissed him, he tried to convince them to at least save the Hellborn, who hadn't committed any sins on Earth. He begged them to save someone, *anyone*, because Roo had no mercy and Lucifer couldn't bear to see every single one of his charges perish at her hands.

When they ignored him, he asked for them to at least save his daughter and they wrinkled their noses and said that she was an abomination and had allowed Roo to escape in the first place.

Lucifer grew frantic. He demanded an audience with the Seraphim - a last-ditch attempt to save his people, or what little remained of his family at the very least. He fell to his knees in front of them and begged them to defy the Archangels' orders and *help* him. Inevitably, they refused.

Until last night.

Two Seraphim had approached him in secret, wishing to speak to him urgently.

Lucifer hadn't revealed any more than that and Charlie was too exhausted to ask. She didn't know where her father was and she didn't see any point in finding out.

Heaven wouldn't help them.

Heaven *couldn't* help them.

Charlie remembered her twenty months, eight days, and six hours in Purgatory like it was yesterday. She remembered Roo's icy touch and her cruel, breathy laugh, and the feeling of fear and panic that had drowned her when Roo's magic filled every crevice and chamber in her body. She remembered wanting to claw her own eyes out to stop seeing the illusions Roo created. She remembered wanting to burn her own skin off to stop feeling Roo's feather-light fingers roaming over her flesh, probing, teasing, taunting, *tearing*... She remembered wanting to hack into her own brain to stop the thoughts and dreams. She remembered wanting to rip her own ears off to stop listening to the lies. She remembered wanting to bite her own tongue off to stop her cries and whimpers for Roo to *stop*.

She wanted to die. She still wanted to die. She could still feel Roo's hands on her body, clawing at her skin, peeling off her fingernails, tearing out her hair as she whispered terrible lies and filled her head with illusions that she wasn't certain were actually illusions, and she made her watch her mother's death in Purgatory over and over, made her listen to her sobs of anguish, made her watch the light fade from her eyes, made her watch her friends' deaths, one by one; deaths that hadn't even happened yet but now they very likely *would* and it was all her fault for getting trapped and-

"Charlie!" Angel said frantically as he ripped her hands away from her own arms, and Charlie barely recognised that she had torn through her jacket and skin with her nails. Blood dripped from the new wounds and Charlie stared at them numbly, unable to feel any pain.

She didn't feel much of anything these days.

Alastor's silhouette had helped to ground her in reality, but now it was gone and for all she knew, she could be back in Purgatory, being forced to watch her friends die slow and painful deaths. Alastor and Vox were already dead.

Death almost sounded nice. Peaceful. No more pain. No more suffering. Merely endless nothing.

She stared at the blood dripping down her arm and her lips twitched into a faint smile at the thought. What a relief it would be to give up, to find Roo and beg for an end to it all. To feel that final blow and then never feel anything again.

Arms slipped around her waist and a head landed on her shoulder.

“Come back to me,” Vaggie whispered, clearly distraught. “Charlie, *please*. I miss you. We all miss you.”

Charlie didn’t respond. What was the point? There was nothing to come back to. Nothing to fight for. Her friends would die soon enough. Her father would die. There would be no one. Nothing. Roo would destroy all of it.

Vaggie buried her face into her neck and Charlie felt wetness against her skin.

It didn’t matter. Vaggie would die soon too. And then she wouldn’t cry again. No one would cry again. Perhaps their deaths would be a blessing.

The thick roots bursting through the hotel floor and walls shifted and slithered closer to Charlie. Charlie watched them idly, wondering what would happen if she reached out and just... let them swallow her whole.

“What happened in there?” Vaggie breathed against her neck in between choked sobs. “Why won’t you talk to me? What did she do to you?”

The roots were so close now. Mere feet away. Charlie slid her foot closer to one.

Husk nudged her foot back with a pained look and he planted himself in front of the root. It hesitated and began to weave around him.

Angel suddenly scooped Niffy off the floor and she didn't protest, even as the root left her dainty leg. Charlie closed her eyes, tired. She was always so tired.

There was a soft gasp from Vaggie and cool hands landed on her cheeks. She scowled and tried to turn her head away, but the hands were insistent and began patting at her face in silence.

Charlie opened her eyes with a scowl.

Her breath hitched.

Alastor's silhouette stared at her with wide eyes. Its hands fluttered against her face and it seemed restless, looking behind itself at the front doors before quickly glancing back to Charlie. Its mouth chattered wordlessly before it grabbed Charlie's wrist and attempted to pull her off the lobby's couch.

This wasn't possible. Alastor's silhouette couldn't be here. This had to be some sort of illusion.

"He's alive," Husk said, stunned, and the silhouette glanced at him impatiently before tugging at Charlie again.

"He can't be," Vaggie whispered. "We saw his body."

Husk shot her an irritated look. "Al's shadow can't exist without him. It's tied to him. It's part of him. If it's here, he must be alive." He wrinkled his nose. "Well, his soul still exists anyway."

“Your chain broke,” Angel pointed out. “Charlie’s deal ended. We *saw* Smiles’ corpse. We saw what was left of Vox. There’s no coming back from that, Husk.”

Husk shook his head in frustration. “Look, all I know is that Alastor’s silhouette can’t exist if his soul was extinguished.”

The silhouette nodded eagerly and tugged at Charlie’s arm again before it caught sight of Rosie and Veltette slowly making their way downstairs, dark circles beneath their eyes and mouths pulled downwards into permanent frowns as their heads remained low.

They had stayed over at the hotel after finding Alastor and Vox’s shredded corpses and neither of them had talked much since revealing what had happened to the pair. They had retreated to their rooms and Charlie had caught Veltette shuffling into Rosie’s room in the dead of the night, tears staining her cheeks and makeup smudged.

Alastor’s silhouette bounced over the couch and raced towards them, curling around them both and grabbing their wrists and tugging eagerly at them.

They looked at it, faces frozen in shock.

It made a frustrated expression before shaking its head and dissolving, then reappearing beside Nifty and rattling her shoulder desperately.

Nifty turned her head away from Angel’s chest and her eye widened before a grin swept across her face.

“He’s alive?” she whispered.

The silhouette smiled and nodded, then wiggled two fingers above its head and drew a square around its face with one finger.

“Vox too?” Rosie breathed.

The silhouette's grin widened and it nodded enthusiastically before making a worried expression and jerking a thumb towards the door.

“I... I don't understand,” Vaggie said. “We saw the bodies.”

The silhouette rolled its eyes and gestured around the hotel and when everyone stared at it in confusion, it pulled a long-suffering face and pointed upwards.

Charlie's brows drew together slowly. “...They went to Heaven?”

Everyone turned to her, shocked at hearing her voice. The silhouette smiled softly at her and nodded.

Charlie studied it for a moment. “...They were redeemed?”

The silhouette nodded again and stepped towards her, fingers closing gently around her hands.

“They're still alive?” she asked, barely audible.

The silhouette smiled warmly before its expression grew worried again. It glanced at the door and pulled Charlie to her feet before noticing the bloody wounds in her arms. It stared at them for a moment before meeting her gaze and laying a hand against her cheek.

Its touch was cold but it wasn't cruel like Roo's touch, and Charlie's eyes fluttered shut as she leaned into its palm.

“If you’re here,” she began, voice hoarse from disuse, “then this is *real*. I’m not in Purgatory and Alastor isn’t dead.”

It brushed a thumb over her cheek before glancing at the door again.

“...He’s in trouble,” Rosie said slowly as she joined the hotel staff, Velvette beside her. “It wants us to help.”

“We’re *all* in trouble,” Angel snorted. “Roo’s picking us off, one by one.”

The silhouette shot him a filthy look before releasing Charlie and racing to the door. It looked back at them expectantly.

“It wants us to follow,” Velvette said, voice unusually quiet.

The silhouette nodded rapidly.

Something flickered within Charlie - a spark of something she hadn’t felt in months. She started towards it and the silhouette grinned with relief.

“Charlie?” Vaggie asked, catching her arm.

Charlie turned to her sluggishly, feeling as though she was wading through thick tar.

“We can’t let them face her alone again.”

The silhouette led them to a van.

A heavily *warded* van that rolled slowly through Hell's streets, avoiding roots as best as it could but inevitably hitting the smaller ones. Charlie had never seen a van like that in Hell before and, judging by the silhouette's scowl, it wasn't meant to be in Hell in the first place.

The silhouette looked at her urgently before speeding towards the van and sliding through the gap between the doors.

"Alastor's in there," Charlie murmured and Vaggie glanced at her before a determined frown swept over her features and she flew in front of the van, aiming her spear at the windshield.

The van skidded to a halt and the driver slammed his horn at Vaggie, who planted her feet. Charlie drifted towards the back of the van, Angel, Husk, and Nifty in tow.

"Some dark shit carved here," Husk said warily as he studied the sigils. "I don't recognise half of these."

"Restriction magic," muttered Charlie as she brushed her fingers over the back doors of the van. "Masking spells so they can't be tracked. Wards to keep prisoners in. Sigils to prevent the use of magic." She tested a door and it didn't budge.

"How do we free them?" Angel asked, gaze flicking towards Vaggie as a bison-like angel slid out of the front of the van and stalked towards her, angelic sword in hand. Vaggie taunted him, distracting him as she waved her spear around threateningly.

Charlie frowned, shuffled backwards and slammed her heel against the door. The door groaned and bent beneath her unnatural strength. There were perks to being born in Hell, with both human and Archangel blood running through her veins.

Angel cocked an eyebrow. "...That works."

Charlie kicked the door again and it bent a little further.

Husk suddenly bared his teeth and lunged for whatever had appeared by Charlie's side. There was a hiss and a yowl and a grunt of pain as Husk was slammed into the back of the door and held off the ground by his throat.

Charlie turned to see-

Michael.

She scowled, horns rising from her skull and eyes glowing red as a tail slithered out of her suit.

"Put him down," she growled. She was too exhausted to be polite. She was sick of angels thinking they could do whatever they wanted. She was tired of them ignoring her father's pleas. She was disgusted by their apathy towards Hell's souls.

Michael narrowed his eyes. "Is that any way to address your uncle?"

Charlie's glare hardened. "Put him down before I rip your fucking tongue out of your head, *please.*"

Husk managed a grin and Angel snickered.

Michael looked at her in disdain. "Half of Hell wouldn't be dead if you had just slit your own throat in Purgatory."

"The *fuck* did you just say to my daughter?" snarled a familiar voice and Michael's eyes blew wide before Lucifer fisted his hair and slammed his face against the van twice. Then, he

tossed his brother carelessly away from Husk and the taller Archangel stumbled, holding his bruised jaw.

Beside Lucifer, Sera and Emily stared at Michael, stunned and he frowned at them in confusion.

Lucifer's gaze raked over the van and he whistled, scowl deepening. "You *really* don't want anyone seeing what's in here, do you? You don't want anyone breaking in or out and you've even used masking wards to hide your presence from me."

His sharp gaze landed on his brother. "Too bad you stepped outside and *threatened my daughter*."

"Alastor and Vox are in there," Charlie murmured and Lucifer glanced at her, seemingly surprised to hear her speak. Then he narrowed his eyes and, with Archangelic strength, kicked the battered door off its hinges.

Lucifer stared into the dark van, eyes widening a fraction. "My, my. Now that *is* a surprise."

There was a Spanish curse before Vaggie fluttered to Charlie's side, brandishing her spear at the bison and rhino-like guards chasing her. Charlie glanced at them, baring her teeth a little and they slowed to a halt, waiting for orders from Michael.

Lucifer turned back to his brother slowly.

"Why are there angels handcuffed in the back of your warded van, Michael?"

Michael bristled. "They aren't angels. They're *demons*."

Lucifer's eyes flashed dangerously. "They have halos. Sure look like angels to me."

Michael gritted his teeth and glanced inside the van with disgust. “They’re sinners. More of your *problems* for Heaven to clean up.”

Lucifer’s smile sharpened. “*Problems?*”

Charlie peered inside the van the same time that Sera and Emily did. Her eyes widened and Alastor perked up as his silhouette waved at her excitedly. Sir Pentious grinned and tried to wave as well, but he scowled at the cuffs hindering him.

...They had been redeemed. Three sinners had now been redeemed, two of them *Overlords*.

Charlie stared and the fog that she had been wading through for months began to clear a fraction.

Anyone could be redeemed. The hotel *worked*. Sinners could become better if they wanted to and their souls could be saved from eternal damnation. That meant she could *save* her people from the Exterminations.

She frowned. The Exterminations were hardly an issue anymore. Roo would likely kill them all before the next one rolled around.

“What were you planning on doing with them?” Emily asked angrily, startling Charlie out of her thoughts.

Michael licked his lips, gaze flicking briefly to Pentious and back to the younger Seraphim.

“Simply returning them to Hell,” he said. “They might even enjoy the opportunity to reunite with their friends.”

“Liar,” Vox snarled as Alastor scowled beside him, and it struck Charlie that Alastor wasn’t *smiling*.

“You were going to deliver us to Roo,” Sir Pentious said indignantly. “You said that’s what you do with all of the redeemed sinners. You gift us to her, like hum- er... dem- er... *angelic* sacrifices.”

Emily gasped as Sera snapped her gaze to Michael. Lucifer’s wings flared and Charlie’s tail thrashed furiously.

“You *what*?”

“You assured me that you were returning them to *Hell*. ”

“You’ve been *feeding* her?”

“*All* of the redeemed sinners?”

Michael looked between them silently for a moment and opened his mouth then promptly closed it again.

“What does he mean by ‘*all* of the redeemed sinners’?” Charlie demanded, clenching her fists. “There are more?”

Michael pressed his lips together and Sera grimaced before turning to her sadly. “There have been many,” she said gently and before Charlie could argue, she continued. “But it didn’t always work out. It turns out that none of us really understand the criteria for getting into Heaven, or Hell. Some redeemed sinners were appearing in Heaven and becoming complacent, lapsing back into their old ways, *murdering*, torturing, committing sins... But Heaven didn’t throw them out. So we made the executive decision to return any redeemed sinner to Hell and strip them of their halo and Heavenly gifts.”

She glowered at Michael. “Or so I thought.”

Lucifer scoffed. “My brothers told you that they had the power to *push* angels out of Heaven, didn’t they? The power to make them Fall?” He smiled bitterly. “Michael can’t strip anyone of their halo. Neither can Gabriel or Raphael. They haven’t been dumping redeemed sinners in Hell.” He shot Michael an icy glare. “They’ve been lying to you.”

Sera’s shoulders lowered as the epiphany struck her. “...That’s why you’re still an Archangel.”

Lucifer huffed. “They exiled me and when I flew to Hell, they called it ‘Falling’ and used it to threaten anyone who stepped out of line. But they can’t turn angels to demons just as I can’t turn demons into angels. That’s the whole point of Free Will, isn’t it? Humans shape their own destinies.”

Horror crossed Sera’s expression. “So, all of those redeemed souls, all of the *winners* that the court ruled to have their powers stripped... You fed them to The Root Of All Evil?”

Michael’s gaze was hard. “You, of all people, should understand that it was *necessary* for the safety of Heaven. Proving to Lucifer or Lilith or even their daughter that redemption and damnation is possible after second death would have been *detrimental* to our people. There would have been a revolution. Bloodshed on both sides. It was necessary to keep order.”

“You don’t know that,” Emily snapped as she helped Pentious out of the van and stood beside him protectively. “Perhaps it could have brought a truce between us? It would certainly have prevented the Exterminations.”

Michael didn’t respond.

“Why sacrifice them to Roo?” Charlie asked coldly. “Why not just kill them yourself? They would be gone permanently then. Why put them through the torture of Purgatory?”

Michael narrowed his eyes.

“You thought it would save you,” Lucifer said after a moment. “You were *scared*.”

“There were cracks *everywhere*,” snarled Michael. “We couldn’t find them all. We certainly couldn’t close them all. Her magic kept seeping through. People kept *disappearing*. I made a deal to save them.”

“Using *my* people!” Lucifer roared, flames crackling between his horns. “Souls that worked hard to better themselves and you just... threw them into a void of pain and darkness and misery.” He clenched his fists. “And you hid all of it from me. You hid it from your own damn Seraphim!”

“Sinners are in Hell for a reason,” Michael growled. “They should stay there. They’ve had their chance on Earth. They don’t *deserve* paradise.”

“*Paradise?*” Emily echoed incredulously. “A paradise where we torture souls and keep secrets from one another and lie to those under our care? Heaven isn’t paradise. It’s a *prison*.”

“Ah... Perhaps we should take this somewhere else?” Alastor suggested carefully and Charlie glanced around them to find thick, black, thorny roots closing in on them at a rapid pace, absorbing their combined fury and despair like starving vultures.

Alastor clambered out of the van awkwardly, with his wrists still bound, and Vox and two other deer-like angels followed him, and Charlie stared as the roots nearest them seemed to... recoil.

“You aren’t *free*, demon,” Michael growled. “Get back in the van. We’re finishing this.”

“This is *my* domain, brother,” spat Lucifer. “And if you won’t protect the souls that saved my daughter, then I will. *Get out.*”

“No,” Michael said. “I refuse to give your demons any hope for an uprising against Heaven. These souls must be destroyed.”

“Look around you,” Lucifer snarled, gesturing to the ruins of Hell. “There is no hope left here! Leave this place, brother. Leave Hell and grant these souls what little happiness they can scrape together before Roo lays waste to us all.” He narrowed his red eyes and pointed a finger at Michael. “But be warned that *you* are next.”

Michael was silent for a long moment and Emily stared at him in horror.

“Help them,” she demanded. “We can’t let them all die. Not now that we know there is a chance for redemption. Gather the Archangels and lock her away again.”

Michael’s icy gaze slid to her. “She’s too powerful. When we created Purgatory last time, there were so few people for her to feed from on Earth and in Heaven and Hell... It’s impossible. Her power far exceeds ours.”

“There are more angels now,” Sera said. “More demons. If we rally together-”

“She’ll destroy us easily,” Michael scoffed. He eyed Lucifer in disdain. “You know that you brought this on yourself. This is the reason we refused to help you.”

“She’s my *daughter*,” Lucifer said firmly. “Family might not mean anything to you, but it does to me.” His gaze grew a fraction glassier. “You sacrificed my *wife* to her, didn’t you? That’s why you wouldn’t speak to me for so long.”

Michael’s gaze softened ever-so-slightly. “Good bye, brother,” he said before throwing out his wings and taking flight, the two guards trailing after him.

Lucifer's shoulders slumped, his expression crumpling, and the roots slithered towards him eagerly.

Charlie watched them curiously, then flicked her gaze to Alastor and Vox's feet again, watching the roots give them a wide berth as they branched over the ground.

Sera and Emily glanced at each other before looking to Lucifer for orders. Lucifer stared at them in surprise before managing a weak smile that fell quickly as he dropped his gaze in defeat and anguish.

"Come on. Let's all go back to the hotel and find a way to break those cuffs."

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Charlie's thoughts turn dark in the second section. Mention of suicide.

So, that is all of Heaven's secrets revealed now! Put your hand up if you wanted Lucifer to throttle Michael ;)

A couple of chapters left...

Also, Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Yuletide etc. etc.!

Chapter 73: Living By Virtue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Never thought I’d see the day,” Angel said as he glanced between Vox and Alastor’s halos curiously. “How’d you swing that one?”

“Probably made some sort of deal,” muttered Husk, earning a dry look from Alastor.

“Now, now, Husker! There’s no need for jealousy,” Alastor drawled as Vox pulled a face.

“Heaven’s hardly any better than Hell,” Vox grumbled. “Think I’d rather stay down here.”

“And you two are... Alastor’s *parents*?” Vaggie asked slowly, frowning at the two deer-angels. “You’ve been in Heaven all this time?”

Jacques and Denise nodded, glancing at their son with small smiles and Alastor brightened, smiling back.

“I must say,” began Denise as she cast her gaze to Lucifer, “I didn’t expect the King of Hell to be so...”

“Short?” Alastor asked with a smirk, disappointed when Lucifer barely even pulled a face.

“*Warm*,” his mother corrected with a reproachful look. “Protective.”

Lucifer spared her a glance as he worked on breaking Vox out of his chain by damaging the sigils. Alastor and his parents were already free.

A tense silence fell over the room before Velvette piped up quietly. “We saw your corpses.”

Both Vox and Alastor grimaced and when Vox was finally freed, he opened his arms wide in invitation. Velvette hesitated before she pursed her lips and shuffled over to him. He wrapped himself around her protectively and carded his fingers through her hair.

Alastor startled when Rosie suddenly hugged him, but he embraced her in return easily, frowning when she whispered a broken “I’m so sorry, Alastor,” into his ear.

“My dear, there’s nothing to apologise for,” he whispered. “Vox and I knew what we were getting into by facing her.”

“I should have been by your side,” Rosie murmured.

He frowned and squeezed her a little. “It worked out, didn’t it?”

Rosie buried her face into his neck in a rare show of vulnerability. “Alastor, I... Most of Cannibaltown has been destroyed. My people have been dispersed. There are a few left in their homes but most of them are gone or... or dead. I’m *afraid*,” she confessed. “We can’t beat her. I can’t save my people - the people who depend upon me, the people who *begged* me to help them when she-” She cut herself off as her voice cracked.

Alastor’s heart twisted and he held her closer.

“I’ve never been afraid of second death,” Rosie whispered. “Not even during the Exterminations. But *this*? I’m afraid of this. I’m afraid of what she’ll show me. I don’t want to see all the people I’ve failed, the people who pleaded for my help. I don’t want to see what she did to them, how she tortured them. I don’t want to hear the fear in their voices. I don’t want to see the pain in their eyes.”

She clutched at his back. “Oh, Alastor, I don’t think I can keep going like this. I’m not strong enough.”

He raised his eyebrows in alarm and glanced down to see a root snaking up her calf.

With a snarl, he gripped it and tore it off her, snapping it. The root crumbled to dust in his palm.

He blinked, stunned and slowly turned his gaze to Vox, who stared back at him with wide eyes. No one else seemed to have noticed the impossible feat except for Alastor's parents, who didn't fully understand why it was so significant.

"What the *fuck*?" Vox blurted, catching everyone's attention.

Alastor glanced around the roots snaking towards the hotel staff and Rosie and Velvette. He tapped Rosie gently on the shoulder. "One moment, my dear, if I may?"

She frowned in confusion and straightened and he slipped away from her before slowly reaching for the root that was almost touching Velvette's heel. Before he could grip it however, it shrank quickly away from him, and he stared at it in surprise before narrowing his eyes and stomping on it before it could retreat further.

Again, it crumbled to dust beneath his foot.

There were soft gasps from Rosie and Velvette and even Lucifer straightened. All eyes turned to Alastor in shock.

"They avoid you," Charlie said after a moment. "I noticed it at the van too. They won't go near you or Vox." She flicked her gaze to Denise and Jacques. "Or your parents."

Alastor cocked an eyebrow and glanced at his parents' feet and, sure enough, the roots were giving them a wide berth.

“Wait, does that mean Michael was *right*?” Vox asked in horror. “She won’t target angels because of all the sacrifices?”

Charlie shook her head. “They target Vaggie and my dad. I doubt it’s anything to do with you being angels.” She watched hollowly as a root snaked closer to her wrist. She didn’t seem to have the energy to move away from it.

Alastor stepped closer to a thick knot of roots beside the bar, watching in fascination as they quickly unravelled and recoiled towards the edges of the room.

He cast his mind back to the night with Vox in his hotel room, when they had rolled over to find every root absent. He frowned, recalling how disgusted Roo had been with him and Vox in Purgatory, complaining whenever they were intimate with one another.

What if it wasn’t the *sex* she had been disgusted by?

What if it was *love*?

This time, he hadn’t even been protecting Vox. He had been protecting *Rosie*, yet the root had still crumbled.

Perhaps it didn’t have to be romantic love.

“Some pretty big thoughts going on in there,” Vox said softly as he held Velvette, gaze on Alastor.

Alastor glanced at him for a long moment. “You’re going to think I sound ridiculous.”

“I always think you sound ridiculous,” teased Vox, earning tiny smiles from Velvette and Rosie.

Alastor offered him a wry look before turning slowly to the rest of the room. “I think *love* is what destroys these roots.”

“No, you’re right. You do sound more ridiculous than usual,” Vox chirped.

Alastor rolled his eyes before gesturing to Rosie. “It doesn’t have to be romantic love. Family and friends seem to count as well. But I truly think that’s why the roots are avoiding us.”

“Why? Because we’re so *bursting* with love?” Vox asked drily. “Come on, Al. We’ve changed, but we’ve not changed *that* much. We might have halos but we’re still assholes.”

“Do you have any better ideas?” Alastor asked irritably.

Vox fell silent, frowning.

“It isn’t love,” Lucifer muttered and Alastor whirled around to face him, feeling rather embarrassed at the suggestion now that everyone was dismissing it.

“Oh? How can you be so certain?” he asked tersely.

“Because I love my daughter,” Lucifer grumbled as he held a hand out towards a root. “And yet...” The root coiled around his palm like a snake and when he gripped it, it held strong, refusing to break. He attempted to slide his hand free, but the root wound tighter around him and he scowled in frustration.

Alastor’s shoulders slumped and he stepped towards the Archangel, tearing the root in half and freeing Lucifer.

Lucifer frowned at him thoughtfully. “...Thank you.”

Alastor tipped his head in acknowledgement before shuffling towards Rosie again and pretending that he wasn't sulking.

There was a playful pulse of static from Vox and Alastor relaxed a little.

"What's your theory then?" Alastor huffed.

Lucifer tilted his head, glancing between Vox, Alastor, Jacques, and Denise carefully. "I'm not sure," he confessed, earning a snort from Alastor.

"You beat Purgatory's trials," Angel said. "Maybe it's that? Overcoming fury and lust and pain and whatever else she feeds on? Maybe it's to do with that. Maybe it weakens her? Starves her?"

Alastor frowned. "If that were the case, wouldn't her roots have crumbled in Purgatory the moment we completed the trials?"

Angel fell silent.

"Absence of those emotions and feelings might make the roots avoid you," said Velvette slowly, "but by touching them, you're actively destroying them. Like... some sort of poison. It must be more than them not being able to feed off you."

"What could possibly *poison* something that feeds off misery?" Rosie asked as Alastor laid a protective hand on her back and Vox held Velvette closer.

"*Hope*," Charlie murmured, head low.

Lucifer blinked at his daughter before turning to Vox and Alastor again, watching their determined frowns and the way they supported their exhausted friends.

“Empathy and patience,” he muttered quietly to himself before pointing absently at Alastor’s parents. “Love.” Then he pointed at Alastor and Vox. “Sacrifice.” He tapped a thumb against his own palm, the one that Alastor had freed moments ago. “Kindness.”

He counted to four on his fingers with a frown, gaze darting quickly from left to right. He looked quickly at Vox and Alastor. “Temperance, Faith, and Honesty,” he mumbled as he jabbed a finger at them. “The moth-demon. The one that screwed us all over. You forgave him, right? Before he died?”

Vox and Alastor blinked before nodding.

“And you dragged each other through those trials because you had faith in each other, right?” Lucifer continued quickly. “You were honest with one another and you believed in each other.”

Vox and Alastor glanced at each other before nodding slowly.

Lucifer counted on his fingers, looking half mad. “The Seven Virtues,” he whispered. “That is what’s destroying them. You’ve demonstrated all seven Virtues; Love, Humility or Faith, Temperance, Patience or Empathy, Kindness, Charity, and Honesty.”

“If that’s true, why couldn’t we destroy the roots when we returned from Purgatory?” Alastor asked, frowning.

Lucifer pursed his lips for a moment before his eyes widened. “Because you hadn’t demonstrated every Virtue at that point. *Charity*. You both sacrificed yourself trying to save Hell’s people. The ultimate show of charity.”

“But how can that be?” Denise asked. “The roots are avoiding us too, and-” She cut herself off and reached for one that was creeping towards Husk, crushing it beneath her heel. “And we can also destroy them. We haven’t been through those trials. We haven’t demonstrated the Virtues.”

“...Maybe you have,” said Vox slowly. “You love your son deeply. You forgave him for becoming an Overlord. You have always had faith that Alastor is a good man and that he didn’t deserve to go to Hell. You showed empathy for every sinner in Hell once you realised how Roo was torturing them and you went out of your way to enlist the Archangels’ aid. You showed kindness to me by inviting me into your family. You are naturally honest people. And lastly, you didn’t hesitate in sacrificing your places in Heaven to stand by your son’s side.”

Vox caught their gazes. “You *have* demonstrated every Virtue.”

“Wait, so that’s it?” Vaggie asked. “We just have to demonstrate every Virtue and we can defeat that bitch?”

Lucifer shook his head. “The Virtues are complicated. You can’t just... perform a kind act or pretend to be empathetic towards someone. You have to really *believe* in what you’re doing. You have to live by them, otherwise they don’t mean anything. One act of kindness doesn’t mean much unless it’s a selfless act.”

“Fat chance of getting sinners to do that,” Angel scoffed. “Have you seen the sort of people who end up down here. ‘Love, empathy, and charity’ aren’t exactly in their vocabulary.”

Alastor smirked. “A pity we don’t know anyone who could help them with that...”

Vox was quick to catch on and he grinned. “Yeah, someone who has experience in *redeeming* qualities...”

All eyes turned to Charlie.

She looked up tiredly before closing her eyes and sighing. “I can’t destroy the roots myself. What makes you think I can help anyone else?”

“Because, my dear, at one point you *did* live by the Seven Virtues. It is only recently that you stopped living by one,” Alastor said softly as he approached her. “*Hope*. Faith in yourself.”

“If that were true, Roo wouldn’t have been able to pull me into Purgatory,” muttered Charlie.

“Ah, but if you remember, she didn’t pull you. Valentino *pushed* you,” said Vox. “And then she tortured you until you lost hope. That’s why the roots can grab you now.”

Charlie frowned thoughtfully and Vaggie squeezed her shoulders in encouragement.

“Come on, Charlie. If anyone can teach these sinners how to be virtuous, it’s you. They’re scared and that makes them more willing to listen. They’ll do anything to survive.”

Charlie pulled a face before lifting her sceptical gaze to Vox and Alastor, who held their thumbs up in encouragement. She sighed and shook her head.

“Where would I even start?”

Vox and Alastor glanced at each other.

“With a little help from social media,” Alastor hummed, rolling his gaze to Velvette.

“And a radio broadcast,” Vox said with a grin.

Vox's fingers fluttered over the familiar dials and sliders and buttons and he blew out a long breath as his heart ached.

Alastor glanced at him from the seat beside him.

"Just like the good old days, right, old pal?" Alastor asked with a lop-sided smile.

Vox huffed a weak laugh and nodded as he brushed his fingers over the guest microphone. "It's exactly as I remember it."

"I had the whole room moved to the hotel's radio tower," Alastor said, patting the mixing desk affectionately. "A lot of memories in this equipment." He side-eyed Vox. "Couldn't bear to let go of them."

Vox's heart melted and he caught Alastor's hand and pressed his lips to his knuckles adoringly.

Alastor's gaze softened and he brushed his fingers down an antenna before turning to the mixing desk and pressing 'record'.

The room was bathed in a gentle crimson glow.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen! It's good to be back on the air and, boy, do we have a show for you! My partner, Vox, is hosting with me and we have a guest joining us later who might just know how to save your souls! Stay tuned - this is a show you *won't* want to miss..."

Chapter End Notes

Think this is the shortest chapter of the fic - but an important one!

I have altered a couple of the virtues slightly to keep with the themes of the show (and the fic), so the Seven Virtues here are: Love, Temperance, Charity, Kindness, Patience (or Empathy), Honesty, and Humility (in the sense of having faith in oneself/those around them rather than in a self-depreciating manner).

We're on the home-stretch!

Chapter 74: Begging For Mercy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hell needed help.

No. Hell needed *hope*.

Because if all of Hell was wiped out, then that meant Heaven was next, and if the lower angels figured out that the strongest and most ruthless of Hell had perished at Roo's hands, well... Heaven would barely last a month.

Hell needed to beat Roo so that she never stepped foot in Heaven.

And if the Archangels wouldn't take charge, then Sera *would*. She had a natural order to protect, after all.

"Your sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers are in need of your aid," Sera announced to the vast ocean of angels before her. "They are being *slaughtered*, and time is running out for you to save them. You asked to see your family and friends in Hell and until now we have always refused, because your safety was our priority. Well, the gates are now open. Your family and friends *need* your help. If you do not act, you will lose them forever."

There were murmurs of alarm and confusion and suspicion, and Emily gave Sera a thumbs-up from the side of the stage.

Sera managed a strained smile. She would be demoted for this. They both would be. They would be lucky if they weren't cast down into Hell for disobeying the Archangels.

Still, what was the point in power if one didn't use it to protect those under their care? If remaining as a Seraphim meant letting Roo slither into Heaven, then Sera would break her own halo.

"What are you talking about?" demanded a voice from the crowd. "What's happening down there?"

Before Sera could open their mouth, another voice responded. "I heard Heaven has a secret army that goes down to Hell and *murders* the people there!"

There were gasps and scoffs and murmurs of confusion.

"Is that true?" someone asked in horror.

"Of course not! Heaven promotes *peace*! The Seraphim would never arrange something like that!"

Sera looked around the muttering angels and held her tongue. That was a revelation for another day. Or perhaps never.

"A great Evil has been unleashed upon Hell," Sera said carefully. "Something we thought was locked away. Now Hell is suffering and they will soon be destroyed if we don't act now."

"What sort of Evil?"

"Who released it?"

"The Root Of All Evil," Sera said. "The thing that infected the Archangel Lucifer and led him astray. The creature that taught humanity about fear and pain and hatred."

There was a lull in the mutterings before someone piped up. “How do we save them?”

A small smile pulled at Sera’s lips. “Allow me to explain the Virtues.”

Mothers were reunited with their sons, brothers with their sisters, and as the weeks passed, something impossible happened.

The roots began to recede.

They withered and crumbled beneath the feet of angels and demons and one-by-one, they retreated from smiling friends.

They left scars upon the infrastructure of Hell as they recoiled and although they still fed from suffering demons - and angels - their food source started to dry up. More importantly, as angels and demons completed each Virtue, the roots’ power to induce fear and despair grew weaker and weaker.

Virtuosity was like a poison to them and after a few weeks, people learned that touching the roots during acts of Virtue was a concentrated toxin to the unsightly black tendrils, destroying them entirely.

More and more angels joined the first batch, entire families reuniting, new friendships being forged, and whilst not everyone welcomed the mingling of sinners and winners, the overall response was overwhelmingly positive. Relief and joy and warmth swept through Hell slowly at first, then like a raging wildfire as sinners realised that they weren’t alone, that Heaven’s people weren’t all like the Exorcists.

The angels helped to repair Hell and slowly, Hell started to change alongside its people.

The future looked a little more pastel-coloured.

“They’re dying,” Vox whispered as he held his lover close and watched the streets below the radio tower. “Al, the roots are *dying*.”

Alastor closed his hand over Vox’s, where it splayed protectively over his stomach. “They’re losing power,” he agreed and Vox made a happy noise and nuzzled into his hair.

“We could beat her,” Vox murmured.

Alastor relaxed against his lover, eyes slipping shut as he basked in Vox’s warmth. His circuit traces glowed golden with joy and Alastor turned slightly, tucking his head beneath his lover’s as he snaked an arm around his waist.

“I’m so lucky to have you,” Vox whispered against Alastor’s ear as his fingers curled into the Radio Angel’s coat. “I’m so lucky to be able to hold you like this.”

Alastor turned and pressed their chests flush as he leaned their heads together. He clutched at Vox’s back and curled his fingers possessively around the back of his neck as Vox instinctively wrapped his arm around Alastor’s waist and cupped his cheek.

“We’re going to have that future we discussed,” Alastor growled. “We’ve *earned* it.”

Vox kissed Alastor’s head sweetly and brushed his thumb over his cheek. “Eternity’s a long time,” he teased. “You sure you won’t get bored of me?”

A smile quirked Alastor’s lips and he nuzzled Vox’s screen, the glass warm against his skin. “Don’t worry, my dear. If that happens, you can just change your head again and it’ll keep me entertained for another, say... ten years?”

“Ass,” Vox scoffed as he squeezed his lover affectionately.

“Guys?”

Vox and Alastor turned towards the door to the radio tower, still holding each other. Charlie watched them, rubbing her arm slowly - a habit she had developed when she was feeling anxious.

“Yes, Princess?” Alastor asked gently.

She studied them for a moment and they very carefully didn’t separate, looking soft and approachable as they settled more comfortably against each other.

“I wanted to thank you,” Charlie said quietly as she stepped further into the room. “For everything you two have done. For rescuing me, for facing Roo, for saving all of Hell...” She shook her head. “If it hadn’t been for you two, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

Alastor’s smile faded and the expression still looked strange on him after so many years of being forced to wear a grin. “We’re not out of the woods yet, I’m afraid.”

Charlie pulled a face. “I know. I know she’s still out there somewhere. Still... Her power is weakening and it’s thanks to you guys.”

“Not just us,” Vox said. “You’re teaching sinners about the Virtues, kiddo. Doing a fine job of it too.”

Charlie managed a small smile and there was a small spark in her eyes that Alastor hadn’t seen for a long while. “They’re eager to survive. The angels are helping. It’s a team effort.”

“Looks like you were right,” Alastor said. “It appears that anyone *can* be redeemed.”

Charlie shook her head and gestured around them. “This is better than redemption. I dreamt of redemption because I wanted the Exterminations to end, but Heaven is hardly perfect and no one really understands how souls get into Heaven or Hell anyway. Living by the Virtues? It’s turning both angels and demons into better people. They’re teaching each other and suddenly, Hell doesn’t seem like such a bad place to be anymore.”

“There are still bad people down here, Charlie,” Vox reminded.

“But there are *good* people too, just as there are bad and good people in Heaven,” Charlie pointed out. “And I think everyone should have the opportunity to be good, even if they don’t choose to take it.” She smiled at them. “I mean, look how you guys changed.”

“We were forced to change,” Alastor said with a frown as he flicked his gaze to Vox. “We had no other choice.”

“Of course you did,” Charlie said with a soft chuckle. “You didn’t have to forgive each other. You didn’t have to put yourself through all that torture to rescue me. You didn’t have to sacrifice yourselves to try to protect Hell. You did all that because you’re fundamentally-”

“Don’t say it,” warned Vox. “We’re Overlords. We own hundreds of souls. We’re not the sweet old men you think we are.”

Charlie’s grin widened. “You *were* Overlords. You *used* to own hundreds of souls. You gave all that up to protect Hell. Because deep down you’re-”

“Charlie, *please*,” Alastor said indignantly. “Spare us the humiliation.”

Charlie laughed. “Because you’re *good people*.”

Vox made a sound of disgust as Alastor pulled a face.

“Kick us while we’re down, why don’t you?” Vox huffed.

“You’re *angels!*” Charlie said with a grin. “You were redeemed!”

“And we’re perfectly terrible at it,” Alastor protested. “We weren’t in Heaven for forty-eight hours before we threatened an Archangel and got booted down to Hell again.”

“To save your friends,” Charlie said. “To save *all* of us.”

Vox waved a hand dismissively. “Technical details. What’s important is we’re awful angels.”

Charlie gazed at them both fondly before crossing the distance between them and cautiously sliding her arms around them both.

“Either way, thank you,” she whispered and their gazes softened as they held her between them.

“You’re worth it, kiddo,” Vox whispered as he rubbed her back.

“Is it not our duty to protect our Princess?” Alastor asked gently and she smiled knowingly at him.

“My dad has pardoned you both,” she whispered, winking. “He says ‘thank you’.”

Alastor tipped his head gratefully and Vox pulled her tighter between them.

“She won’t hurt you again,” Vox murmured. “We won’t let her. Right, Al?”

Alastor nodded and Charlie exhaled slowly and melted between them.

“I’m glad you guys found happiness,” she mumbled, burying her face into Alastor’s chest. “You deserve it.” Vox and Alastor shared a fond glance.

A cool breeze tickled the backs of their necks and Alastor barely had time to turn before fingers wrapped around his throat and a vicious snarl sounded beside his ear as he was thrown against the mixing desk.

He grimaced as he peeled himself off the console, spine throbbing, and he opened his eyes in time to see Roo standing before him, mouth stretched into a disdainful sneer and eyes bright with fury as roots writhed and lashed the air around her.

Vox threw Charlie behind him and Roo’s gaze snapped to him.

“You think you can use *angels* to defeat me?” she snarled as she reached for Vox.

Rage and hatred swept over Alastor and he charged like a bull, leaping upon her back before her fingers could close around Vox’s neck. She made a furious sound and her thorny roots whipped Alastor’s skin as he clawed at her, wings extending from his back and battering her body.

One of the roots coiled around Alastor’s leg, hurling him across the room, but Vox was suddenly on her, discharging as much electricity through her frame as he could muster. The lights and mixing desk flickered haphazardly and when she screamed, Alastor knew how weak she was.

He staggered towards the pair, gripping the roots that snaked around Vox’s stomach, and he tore them in half with a growl as Vox gripped her hair and twisted her neck painfully, electricity crackling through both of them.

“Fucking bitch!” Vox roared and Alastor’s eyes became dials as he summoned his shadows and wrapped them around her, swallowing her, suffocating her, invading every inch of her body like she had invaded both Vox and Alastor with her own magic.

She choked and screamed and clawed at them both, ordering her roots to wind around them, but Vox and Alastor caught them easily, breaking them like thin twigs.

Tears of pain filled her eyes and Alastor grinned viciously. “I’m going to broadcast your fucking screams across all of Hell,” he hissed and she glared at him as his shadows snapped her bones and tore at her organs.

Vox grit his teeth and fried her from the inside out, and the air thickened with charge as all of Pentagram City’s lights flashed and flickered.

Alastor’s antlers grew, acting as antennae as the tower’s recording light switched on, and he summoned his microphone and bared his teeth as she howled with agony.

Blood dripped from her mouth and nose and bruises painted her skin as she manifested more and more roots, and then Charlie was between Vox and Alastor in all of her demonic glory, an angel blade between her fingers as she thrashed her tail and snarled at Roo.

She plunged the blade between Roo’s ribs, straight through her heart.

Roo screeched, clawing at the air as Vox kicked her to the ground.

Then she began to laugh.

And her roots grew thicker, sharper, and they curled around Vox, Alastor, and Charlie and slammed them against the opposite wall.

She picked herself up off the floor as they struggled in her grip, and she dusted herself off with a shark-like smile.

“Your fury is *delicious*,” she whispered and Vox and Alastor glanced at each other wildly as the roots refused to crumble beneath their touch.

“Did you really think you could kill me?” she asked softly, as though she was talking to children. “Did you really think a blade would destroy me?”

She tilted her head at the growling Charlie. “I’ve got no soul,” she said quietly. “I’m not Hellborne or Heavenborne. I’m not a monster to be slain, naive lamb. I simply *am*. I’m part of the balance of the universe. I’m part of humanity. I’m in your veins. I’m part of the natural order. Suffering is *necessary*. It is part of life and death. Without me, you wouldn’t appreciate your so-called *Virtues*.”

“Bullshit,” snarled Vox. “You’re just *greedy*. You’ll destroy us all with your suffering and pain and despair. You aren’t content to just feed off life’s natural misery. You want to cause your own misery. You want to *feast*.”

Roo smiled darkly at him. “I still have Heaven and Earth. I think I’ll destroy Heaven first and then I’ll live the rest of eternity on Earth, feeding from those pitiful humans, maybe induce a little fear and fury up there, start a few delicious wars... It’s always fun when the humans start wars with themselves.” Her smirk widened. “You can’t kill me. I can’t be destroyed.”

“You can be hurt,” Alastor snarled. “That’s enough!” His shadows surged down her throat and through her eyes and nose and ears and she screamed in pain before the sound tailed off into more laughter even as Alastor ripped through her intestines and slashed at her lungs.

As quickly as Alastor broke her, she repaired herself with sickening cracks and squelches, and Alastor’s chest heaved as he recalled his shadows exhaustedly.

“So much fury and fear and pain,” she drawled as she approached him and his ears flattened as she brushed gentle fingers down his cheek.

“Leave him alone!” Vox roared as electricity surged along her roots, burning her flesh.

She giggled and dug her nails into Alastor’s skin, making him hiss.

“That’s it,” she goaded Vox as he bared his teeth at her. “Hurt me. Go on, little Picturebox. Show me no mercy!”

She smacked Alastor hard across the face before slicing her nail through the corner of his mouth and etching a wide smile into his face. He made a sound of pain and Vox’s electricity made her skin bubble as Charlie writhed against her roots.

Finally, Vox made a sound of frustration and slumped against the wall tiredly, panting as his fans ran on overdrive.

She chuckled and a thick root lashed his screen, making him cry out as a spiderweb of cracks radiated across his face.

“Come on! Where’s that ruthlessness?” she taunted as she prowled towards him and Alastor noticed her roots were growing thicker and longer and thornier, stretching around the radio tower like deadly snakes.

Vox glowered at her then spat in her face.

Her smile fell and her roots plunged through his screen, blinding him, destroying the delicate components beneath.

Alator thrashed against his restraints, heart racing as history repeated itself. “No!” he yelled. “Get away from him!”

She gave him a dark look, which seemed even more sinister under the eerie red glow of the recording light.

Her roots coiled around Vox's neck. "I warned you what would happen if you disobeyed me, stupid fawn."

Vox choked.

Lucifer crashed through a window and ploughed into her and the roots' grip loosened a fraction as Lucifer beat her bloody.

A few moments later, the rest of the hotel staff poured into the room, fully armed, and rushed to help Lucifer.

She cackled as they tore into her and her roots grew even thicker, and Alastor watched in horror as the roots in Hell's streets began to branch out again, digging up the ground as they went.

The roots inside the tower reared high above the hotel staff before raining down on them viciously, and blood painted the floor and walls as weapons clashed with thorns and cries of agony filled the tower.

"No *tch* mercccccyy," Vox muttered through his damaged vocoder before he clenched his fists. "Shhhhit."

Alastor swallowed thickly, hands shaking a little as he stared at his lover's dark, broken screen. He blanketed Vox in soothing static and received a reassuring pulse in return.

Rage flooded Alastor's chest at Vox's pain, and he released his silhouette, watching as it joined the fray.

“Zzzz-Stop!” Vox said desperately. “S-s-stop! Merrrr-cy!”

Alastor frowned in confusion and the wounded hotel staff seemed to barely hear him.

Sparks chipped off Vox’s frame. “M-m-mercy!” he snarled before there was a loud *pop* and a faint smell of smoke. Vox slammed his fist frustratedly against the wall and Alastor knew his vocoder had just given out.

Charlie frowned for a moment before her eyes widened and she threw a desperate look towards her friends. “Stop!” she yelled. “We have to show her mercy!”

Alastor shot her a wild look as Vox nodded eagerly.

“What?” Vaggie asked hysterically, holding her bloodied arm as she was cornered by two whipping roots.

“She’s gaining power!” Charlie said frantically. “Mercy is one of the Virtues-”

A root tore through Charlie’s face, making her cry out, before the same root forced its way into her mouth. Her eyes blew wide with fear.

Alastor whistled for his silhouette’s attention and it turned quickly to him before stiffening and racing to Charlie’s aid, tugging frantically at the root. Once free, Charlie sucked in a deep breath and raised a shaky gaze to her friends. “We’re feeding her. Show mercy.”

“She’s a monster!” Alastor snarled. “She doesn’t deserve mercy!”

There was a pulse of comforting static and Alastor glanced at Vox, who stared back with his broken, blinded screen.

Alastor recalled Vox's death - how carelessly Roo had killed him. How much agony and torment she had caused them both. How she had destroyed their lives over and over throughout the last hundred years.

His antlers grew taller. "She deserves to *suffer*," he spat.

Vox shook his head quickly as Charlie's gaze softened with sympathy.

Alastor watched in confusion as the hotel staff lowered their weapons one-by-one, backing away from the battered Roo. Even Lucifer stepped away, marching towards his daughter.

Roo smirked at Alastor and winked.

Alastor summoned his shadows once more and laid into her with a snarl and his silhouette glanced between Charlie and Alastor for a moment, torn, before its gaze landed on Vox's broken face and it growled silently and pounced upon Roo, clawing and biting at her like a wild beast.

Roo laughed and her grip on Alastor tightened, winding him.

"Alastor, stop!" Charlie said desperately, but Alastor scowled at her.

"She ruined *everything!*" he roared. "She's killed *millions!* She tortures them for her own entertainment! She destroys everything she touches!" His voice cracked. "She killed *Vox!* She possessed me! Made me hurt him! Made me lure him into Purgatory, where she-"

Soothing static skittered over his skin as a comforting frequency settled into harmony with his own.

Alastor watched as the roots around Vox and Charlie crumbled to dust even as the ones around him tightened, thorns biting into his soft stomach. Vox felt along the wall blindly and

Charlie grasped his arm and led him towards Alastor. He cupped Alastor's cheeks gently, thumb brushing against the wounds at the corners of Alastor's mouth.

Alastor trembled beneath his tender touch.

"Vox is right here," Charlie whispered and Vox nodded. "Despite everything, he's here, by your side."

Alastor swallowed and glanced at Roo's bruised form. His lip curled in disgust. "I can't forgive her. I can't show her mercy. She deserves to *suffer*."

His shadows pulled at her body and choked her, and her roots squeezed Alastor harder until he found it difficult to breathe.

Vox carded his fingers through Alastor's hair, patient and adoring, and an anguished sob left Alastor's throat.

"Vox, I *can't*," he pleaded. "Don't make me. Not after what she's done to you. To both of us."

Vox carefully leaned his broken screen against Alastor's forehead, pulsing devoted, *hopeful* static between them.

To his dismay, Alastor's resolve began to waver. "Please, my love," he whispered. "I'm not good enough a man for that."

Vox brushed a thumb over his cheek.

Alastor's shoulders slumped. "Alright," he murmured. "For you I can show temperance. I'll do anything for you."

Happy static bounced off Alastor's skin and the roots started to recede.

Roo fell silent, panting softly as she remained slumped over the ground. Alastor eyed her in disdain.

"What do we do with her now?" Vaggie asked, rolling her sore shoulder as Rosie and Velvette slid to Alastor and Vox's sides.

"Lock her up?" Velvette spat.

"Somewhere she can never touch another soul," Rosie agreed.

Lucifer fussed over his daughter for a few moments before narrowing his eyes at Roo. "I should carve wards into your ribs and keep you in chains for the rest of eternity. Put you somewhere I can keep an eye on you and make sure you can *never* use your magic on another soul again."

A smirk twitched Roo's lips and Charlie frowned. "...Except that's not mercy. That's *punishment*. More suffering. Mercy would be to give her the chance to *change*."

Roo's smirk fell and she glowered up at the princess.

Charlie gave her a hard look. "Mercy would be to give her the opportunity to complete the trials that were made for her."

"Purgatory is *gone*," Roo snarled. "And the other Archangels won't help you to rebuild it."

Lucifer tilted his head curiously and glanced around the hotel staff. "...Perhaps I don't need them. Archangels are powerful, but I'm starting to realise that raw power doesn't mean much when it comes to you. Maybe... Maybe I just need a little help from some *virtuous* friends?"

Charlie brightened and Alastor mumbled a quiet chant as he held Vox's face between both palms, and green sigils flashed around them as Vox's screen repaired itself.

Vox grinned at Alastor and pressed his lips to his forehead.

Roo made a sound of disgust and Alastor eyed her sharply before slotting his lips against Vox's and swallowing his chuckle. He was being petulant but he didn't care. She deserved it.

Roo muttered something under her breath about rabbits.

"What do you say, Alastor? Vox?" Lucifer asked and it was obvious it wasn't the first time he had asked as he raised an eyebrow at them.

Vox smiled sheepishly as Alastor continued to glower at Roo.

"Sorry, what was that?" Vox asked.

"I said you know those trials inside out," Lucifer repeated patiently. "Fancy giving me a hand recreating them for our *friend* here?"

Alastor and Vox glanced at each other before smirks swept slowly across their faces.

Chapter End Notes

Clever Vox for figuring it out ;)

Also, Happy New Year everyone :)

Chapter 75: A Leap Of Faith

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A forked tongue poked out of Lucifer's mouth as he scribbled furiously into his notebook.

It wasn't actually a notebook, more of a large artist's sketchpad, but Lucifer scratched words and messy drawings alike into the pages, referring every so often to previous pages he had written upon.

The hotel staff watched him curiously, Alastor and Charlie perched either side of him as Vox stood behind Alastor, leaning on the back of the couch as he petted Alastor's hair idly and watched the King of Hell scribble. They were joined by Sera, Emily, Sir Pentious, Rosie, and Velvette, with Alastor's parents lingering near the bar, looking a combination of curious and anxious.

They weren't the only ones feeling anxious. In the centre of the floor sat Roo herself, chained and bound with warded restraints to prevent her from accessing her magic.

"How did you know where we were?" Vox asked after a while.

Lucifer continued his etchings. "Alastor's broadcast," he mumbled distantly with a frown as he erased something and started again. "Could hear you guys fighting over every radio and sound system in Hell."

Vox made a noise of acknowledgement and the room fell quiet once more.

"What exactly is it that you're doing?" Sera asked with a frown.

"Planning," grunted Lucifer.

“Planning *what?*”

“Purgatory two-point-oh,” said Lucifer impatiently.

“Can we see?” Nifty asked.

“Not finished yet,” muttered Lucifer as his tongue slid to the opposite side of his mouth.

“...Should *she* really be sitting in the middle of the floor while you plan her prison?” Husk asked as he gestured to The Root Of All Evil, who rolled her eyes.

“It’s not a prison,” Alastor drawled. “It’s a test of betterment.”

Lucifer grunted in agreement and showed Alastor something and Alastor stared at the page for a long moment before tapping at a scruffy sketch and shaking his head. Lucifer frowned thoughtfully and erased it before trying again.

“Right, whatever,” muttered Husk. “But should she be sitting *right there?*”

“Would you prefer us to seat her at the bar?” Alastor asked with a smirk. Husk clamped his mouth shut and busied himself with washing glasses.

“Kitty-cat’s right,” Velvette huffed, earning a scowl from Husk. “You shouldn’t underestimate her.”

Alastor shot her a dark look. “We aren’t. We’re keeping her where we can see her.”

“How’s that?” Lucifer asked as he held the sketchbook out for Vox, Alastor, and Charlie to see. “Notice any loopholes?”

They studied the page carefully before shaking their heads, and Lucifer beamed and turned to the next blank page.

“I don’t understand,” Emily said slowly. “If Purgatory didn’t work the first time on her, why would you make another?”

“Because this time, the trials will be different,” Vox said. “They won’t be about pain or lust or despair or fury. They’ll be based on the Seven Virtues.”

“That way, if she does somehow manage to drag someone into Purgatory, they won’t want to... y’know... extinguish their own soul,” Charlie said with a grimace.

“So, she might be able to lure someone in to complete the trials for her?” Angel asked in alarm. “What’s to stop all this from happening again? She won’t learn anything!”

“That’s the part I’m working on,” grumbled Lucifer. “When Purgatory was first created, we didn’t know that others would be able to compete on her behalf. We didn’t know they could free her. I’m tweaking the programme.”

“It won’t work,” Roo chuckled quietly. “I’ll *always* find a loophole, stupid duck.”

Lucifer wrinkled his nose at the nickname and kicked her in the back roughly. Charlie shot him a reproachful look and he pulled a face before returning his attention to his sketchbook.

Roo straightened, still smiling. “Evil is in all of you. Adam and Eve passed it down to every human.”

“Metaphorically,” Vaggie growled, “it’s true that everyone is *capable* of Evil because of what you did to the apple. But that doesn’t make us Evil. We can overcome those thoughts, practice virtue. That’s something you have yet to learn.”

Roo’s smirk grew. “True. These days, Evil is a part of your genetics. The part of me that flowed through Adam and Eve’s veins has been so diluted that it is practically negligible in the humans of today.” She glanced at Sera and Emily. “Those born in Heaven and Hell never carried my magic, and the sinners and winners of this time carry only trace amounts.” She shook her head. “A pity, really. Still, Evil is in their DNA.”

They waited for her to continue but she fell silent, smiling eerily.

Lucifer scowled and erased something, then began writing again.

“Done,” he mumbled after a few minutes and when Vox and Alastor peered over his shoulder, he shut the sketchbook with a satisfied smirk and bounced to his feet, narrowing his eyes at Roo.

“Up,” he commanded. “Get up.”

Roo obeyed, smile never faltering, and Lucifer summoned his cane and twirled it around his fingers before opening a portal of golden light. The writing in the sketchbook glowed golden and Lucifer tapped the book with the apple of his cane, and his audience watched as all of his ideas leapt out of the book and floated in the air around them, glowing brightly before zipping into the portal.

Once they had all vanished inside the pool of golden light, Lucifer nudged his cane against Roo’s back. “Get in,” he growled.

Roo cast her gaze to Vox and Alastor. “A pleasure working with you boys,” she purred. “I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

Alastor bared his teeth at her as Vox flipped her off.

“Enough,” Lucifer snapped. “Get out of my daughter’s hotel.” He forced her towards the portal.

“You aren’t going to release me from my restraints?” she asked, holding her chained hands up.

He shook his head. “You work through the trials without magic and without the ability to drag people into Purgatory whenever you notice a crack between worlds. You’re doing this the old-fashioned way - through hard work, like Alastor and Vox did.”

She hummed and shuffled towards the portal. “I suppose I should *bite the apple*,” she said in a strange tone before stepping through the portal.

It closed quickly behind her.

Lucifer scowled. “Freak,” he growled before turning towards his daughter and slumping next to her on the couch.

Vox and Alastor glanced at each other warily and when the tension in the room subsided and everyone started to converse between themselves, they joined Rosie, Velvette, and Alastor’s parents at the bar.

“That wasn’t unsettling at all,” Velvette muttered sarcastically.

“What a peculiar turn of phrase,” Rosie said slowly. “*Bite the apple.*”

“Well, yeah,” said Vox. “Because Lucifer, Adam, and Eve bit the-”

He cut himself off and turned wide eyes upon an equally horrified Alastor.

They raced towards Lucifer, snatching the sketchbook out of his hands and flipped to the only page they hadn't seen - the last page. Lucifer made a noise of protest and reached for the book, but they shoved him back into his seat as they scanned the notes.

"Shit," Vox whispered as Alastor's ears lowered. They turned to Lucifer in unison and he scowled up at them in confusion.

"What?"

They showed him the page and he frowned at it before his gaze caught on the note he had edited at the bottom at the last moment. His eyes widened and his expression fell into one of horror and suddenly, a thick black collar appeared around his neck.

He gasped and tugged at it fruitlessly and his hands began to shake as Charlie inhaled and pulled at the collar and chain.

"No!" she cried as Lucifer froze, face pale. "No, she can't do this!"

Vaggie looked between them, fear filling her gaze. "I don't... I don't understand. *How?*"

"Lucifer bit the apple," Vox whispered, horrified. "We might only have traces of her in our blood, but he..."

"She's a part of him," Alastor murmured as he passed Lucifer's sketchbook to Vaggie.

"And in the creation of this new Purgatory, Lucifer shall tether himself to The Root Of All Evil, acting as her servant and link to the outside world," Vaggie read aloud. *"...Signed Lucifer."*

She lowered the book and stared at Lucifer. "...Why? Why would you write that?"

"I didn't!" Lucifer snapped before his head fell into his hands. "I... I don't remember writing it."

"She influenced you," Alastor murmured. "Perhaps even possessed you."

"She was *restrained*," Lucifer said desperately.

"Not the part that lives inside you," Vox said.

"You said that when she possessed you, you *knew* it was happening," Lucifer protested. "I don't... I don't even *remember* writing that!"

"She possessed us through our chains," Vox said slowly. "Our contracts. But you actually have a piece of her inside you. Maybe it was less possession and more... her taking control?"

Lucifer's face grew even paler. "...Then she won. After everything. She got exactly what she wanted."

"Dad, no. That's not true," Charlie started, but Lucifer gave her a wild look as he tugged at his chain.

"Of course it is! I'm her *servant*. I'll be forced to deliver souls to her! And... And if I refuse... She can just *take over*." His breaths shook. "She could ask me to deliver you to her."

"You wouldn't do that," Charlie whispered, clutching at her father's coat.

“I won’t have a choice!” Lucifer snapped before he ran a hand through his hair.

“There has to be a way out of this,” Sera said quickly. “A way to... *exorcise* her from you.”

Lucifer shook his head but Sera frowned and raised her wings. “I could contact Heaven. There has to be someone who knows *something*.”

“Like the other Archangels?” Lucifer snapped angrily. “If they find out about this, they’ll *kill* me!”

“They’re your brothersss,” Sir Pentious said quietly. “They wouldn’t do that, would they?”

“If I’m her only link to this world? A way for her to escape?” Lucifer scoffed. “They cast me out once before. They would have let Charlie die at her hands. Is it that unbelievable that they’d kill me if they thought it would keep them and the rest of Heaven safe?”

“Alastor and Vox broke their chains,” Velvette pointed out.

“By *dying*,” Vox argued. “We were just lucky that we were redeemed.”

Lucifer shook his head in defeat. “I’m already an angel. I can’t *be* redeemed.”

“You could regenerate,” Rosie suggested. “Let someone kill you temporarily and regenerate.”

“The contract is tied to a person’s soul,” Alastor said. “Or in Lucifer’s case, his grace. Temporary death doesn’t destroy the soul, only the body.”

“Then maybe we should contact my brothers,” growled Lucifer. “Let them finish me off.”

“No!” Charlie snapped as she threw her arms around him. He caught her easily, expression softening.

“I can’t risk her asking me to deliver you to her. I can’t let her possess me. I won’t allow her to put our people at risk of being *destroyed* in Purgatory. I won’t let her *win*. ”

“She’s already taken Mom,” Charlie whimpered. “I can’t lose you too.”

Lucifer frowned and held his daughter tighter.

“This can’t be it,” Vox growled. “After everything we’ve faced, everything we’ve all done... She can’t *win*. There has to be a way out of this.”

Alastor picked up Lucifer’s sketchbook and leafed through it with a frown. “...Maybe there is.”

Vox stared at him, dread filling his chest. “Alastor...”

Alastor shot him an apologetic look. “We’ve beaten it once before.”

“The rules have changed!” Vox said frantically.

“Exactly,” muttered Alastor. “Things are different. *We* are different. We aren’t on her chain anymore.”

Vox’s shoulders slumped. “Twenty months trapped there. Please, Al. Don’t make us go back.”

“You don’t have to come with me,” murmured Alastor as he dropped his gaze to the book. “But this has to end. We can’t keep living in fear of her returning, of her taking more and more people. Someone has to stop her.” He frowned, gripping the book tighter, anxiety clear in his gaze. “Lucifer can’t do it now, can he?”

Vox clenched his fists. “Fuck you for even *offering* to face her alone. We go together or not at all.” He huffed. “And I have a feeling that ‘not at all’ isn’t an option.”

A small smile tugged at Alastor’s lips, but before he had a chance to respond, his mother piped up.

“Are you crazy?” she snapped as she strode over to him. “I thought I’d raised you smarter than that! You aren’t going back there! You aren’t facing that *monster* again! Not after everything she put you both through!”

Alastor raised his eyebrows. “Mom, I can hardly sit around and do nothing...”

Her gaze was suspiciously glassy. “Let someone else play hero for once! I’ve only just got you back! Are you forgetting that she *killed* you? If she does that again, there’s no second chance! You can’t be redeemed a second time!”

Alastor’s gaze softened and he caught her hands. “She has to be stopped. What if Lucifer is forced to take you to her? Or Dad?”

“Let someone else sacrifice themselves,” Denise whimpered, a tear spilling over her cheek. “Why does it always have to be you? Why does it have to be *my* sons?”

Vox raised an eyebrow in surprise, touched by her inclusion of him. Alastor wiped the tear from her cheek.

“We know her better than anyone,” he murmured.

“Then take us with you,” Jacques said as he stepped towards them and Alastor’s gaze snapped up to him.

“No,” he growled. “It’s too dangerous. Vox and I have faced her before-”

“And you *died*,” Denise protested. “You would have died again if Lucifer hadn’t interrupted the last fight!”

“This time it’s different,” Alastor said. “She won’t have the same power.”

“You can’t kill her,” huffed Lucifer. “She wasn’t lying about that.”

“Maybe we don’t have to,” Alastor said. “If we can convince her to complete the trials-”

“And that’s a big *if*,” Denise interjected.

Alastor tipped his head a little. “If we can convince her to complete the trials, then perhaps she’ll have no need for new souls. Perhaps she’ll release Lucifer from his contract.”

“And perhaps she won’t,” argued Denise. “Perhaps she’ll trap you in Purgatory for another twenty months - or longer!”

Alastor’s gaze softened as her eyes filled with tears and he pulled her against him and kissed her head gently.

“We have to try,” he whispered. “We have to do something.”

She buried her face into his chest and cried quietly and Alastor startled when his father held them both.

“My love, look how brave our son is,” Jacques whispered. “We should be proud of the man he has become.”

Alastor’s heart filled with warmth and a smile spread across his face.

“I *am* proud,” Denise huffed. “But I want our son to *live*.”

Jacques kissed her fluffy ear. “Have a little faith. Alastor and Vox are clever men. They’ll return to us.” He flicked his sharp gaze to Alastor. “Won’t you?”

Alastor nodded and retreated from his parents, relaxing when he felt Vox’s supportive arm slip around his waist.

Jacques slid his gaze to Vox. “You’ll take care of him?” he asked sternly.

“I promise,” Vox replied easily.

Alastor threw his gaze to Lucifer. “Open the portal.”

“She could kill you,” Lucifer warned.

“We’ve played this game before,” said Vox. “Open the portal. Give us twenty-four hours, then re-open it to let us out.”

Lucifer stared at them for a long while, seemingly shocked by their willingness to help him.

“Thank you,” he whispered before he opened the golden window to Purgatory.

Alastor and Vox stepped into the light.

Purgatory was as dark as they both remembered it.

Vox’s heart started to race, eyes growing a fraction wider as memories of their last trip to this terrible void came flooding back. Alastor nudged their hips together, grounding him again, and Vox threw him a grateful look and quickly kissed his ear when he noticed how low they were.

His ears sprung upright again and Alastor smiled weakly at Vox before inhaling deeply and pushing forwards.

A set of gates appeared before them, with each post bearing seven green lights. Seven green lights that were already *lit*. The gates were open.

Vox and Alastor stared at them for a moment.

“Seven Virtues,” muttered Vox. “I guess we’ve already beaten the trials?”

Alastor nodded slowly and something like relief crossed over his face as they passed through the gates and nothing happened. No monsters, no roots, no scenery changes, no angry figures from their pasts... Just darkness.

They walked and walked, sticking together as they looked around, and when unease settled into Vox’s veins as recent memories took over his thoughts, he slid his hand into Alastor’s,

holding on tightly.

Alastor squeezed him in reassurance. They wouldn't split up this time. This wasn't an illusion - Alastor really was beside him.

“What if we can't find her?” Vox asked.

“Then we simply leave and find another way to stop all of this,” Alastor said. “But I doubt it'll come to that.”

They continued wandering and stopped when a path appeared ahead of them, spotlights marking the floor.

They glanced at each other before swallowing and pressing forwards. As they ventured up the path, holographs displayed either side of them, showcasing their pasts, from Vox offering Alastor the coffee cup during the Overlord meeting, to Alastor throwing himself over Vox's mangled body and refusing to leave him even as thick, thorny roots tore them both to shreds.

The path was long and straight and the holographs displayed their brief time with Valentino in Purgatory; how they had held him before he had raced through the gates to allow them to continue their trials, how Vox had chased after him with tears tracking down his screen.

They displayed their daring rescue of Charlie and their protectiveness over Vaggie when she had joined them in Purgatory. They showed their affection for Velvette and laughter with Rosie, and Vox and Alastor realised that the holographs were replaying their completed Virtues.

Finally, after rolling through their sacrifice for Hell, the holographs flicked off and Vox and Alastor were left standing before a chained and smirking Roo. The air was warm.

“Back again so soon?” she drawled. “I don't recall asking my idiotic duck to bring you to me.”

“What do you think you’re going to achieve here?” Alastor asked. “The trials are different. You won’t be able to feed off the souls that face them because there won’t be any pain or fury or lust. The only things here are love and temperance and patience. Virtues.”

“You underestimate me,” Roo said, but her smile flickered into a soft frown.

“You’re bound,” Vox pointed out. “More so than last time. You can’t access your magic here.”

“I’ll find a way.”

“And then what?” Alastor asked in exasperation. “We’ve both checked the plans. Bringing souls here and having them complete the trials won’t set you free. You *must* complete them by yourself.”

Her frown deepened. “We’ll see about that.”

“You don’t have to wait to find out,” Vox said. “We’ve completed the trials. The lights are green. Yet you can’t escape, can you?”

Her frown became a scowl and she fell silent.

“You’re going to starve if you stay here,” Alastor said. “Having Lucifer deliver people to you won’t help. It will only turn them into better people by teaching them virtuosity.”

“I’ll feed off Lucifer’s misery then,” Roo snapped. “I’ll take everything he has. I’ll wear his grace like a trophy! What greater warning to those who join me here, that I own a piece of the King of Hell!”

“Not the most fulfilling of meals,” Vox mused. “One Archangel.”

Alastor frowned. “...What do you mean ‘wear his grace’?”

She sneered. “Heavenborne don’t have souls, stupid fawn. They have grace, just as Hellborne have darkness.”

Alastor pulled a face. “I’m aware. What do you mean by you’ll ‘wear’ it?”

She grinned with too many teeth. “I like to keep trophies from those who die in my name. Those who die feeding me. Those who suffer pain and fury and despair and all of those delicious feelings. When they die, I take a piece of their soul or their grace or their darkness and I keep it with me so I can relive the misery they faced over and over. When I have squeezed every last drop of misery from them, I keep hold of their pieces and watch their torment forever, like looking at a picture trapped in a frame.”

She chuckled darkly. “Would you like to see?”

She opened her coat and lining the inside were *millions* of pinpricks of white lights and grey lights and black lights and dark smoky swirls and silver smoky swirls, and they were blinding, and they flickered in agony and despair, and Alastor and Vox turned away in grief, unable to look at their intense suffering for too long.

She laughed and closed her coat.

“Lucifer will join them very soon. The Forgotten. The dead. He’s *mine*.”

“And when he’s gone, what will you do?” Vox asked. “Let yourself starve? Let yourself rot away up here?” He smiled bitterly. “One day, you’ll be forgotten too.”

Her smirk fell and her eyes flashed dangerously as she advanced on them. “And whose fault is that?”

“Yours,” Alastor growled. “For being a coward. For refusing to change.”

“I’m no coward,” she snarled and there was a pause where she tried to summon her roots to no avail.

“Except you are,” Alastor said. “You wouldn’t complete the original trials yourself because you were *afraid* and you won’t complete these trials for the same reason. You’re just a frightened, lonely little girl pretending to be bigger than she is.”

She clenched her fists and her hair whipped around her with an invisible wind. The air remained warm.

“Bite your tongue,” she snarled. “You have no idea what I’m capable of. I could kill you and trap you here forever as one of my *trophies*.”

“Do change the record, dearie,” Alastor drawled. “You’re becoming a one-trick pony.”

Vox tilted his head. “What are you so afraid of? Why not just complete the trials and get out of here? Why go to all this trouble?”

She scowled at him before her shoulders lowered a fraction. “I have no soul. I have no grace or darkness. I am *made* of fury and pain and despair and everything else I feed on. If I were to complete the Virtues, what would that make me? Would I cease to exist? What happens if The Root Of All Evil becomes virtuous? Surely, they would cancel one another out.”

Vox raised his eyebrows. “You’re afraid of death.”

“I can’t die,” she snapped defensively in a way that implied she *might* be able to die, that she wasn’t sure. “And I’m not *afraid* of anything.”

“Then you have nothing to lose,” Alastor said lightly. “Take a leap of faith. Start the trials. See what happens.”

“Angels shouldn’t indulge in temptation,” growled Roo and Alastor flicked his own halo before shrugging.

“Demons shouldn’t indulge in virtuosity, but... here we are. No longer demons, but not very good at being angels either. Still very much *ourselves*, though.”

“Change isn’t always a bad thing,” Vox said gently. “Sometimes, change is for the better.”

“Spare me your condescension,” she muttered.

Vox shrugged. “We’re just pointing out facts. Honestly, if you stay up here and starve, we’ll be celebrating. You’re kind of a bitch.”

She glowered at him and he flashed her a grin.

“But if you choose to complete the trials, I think everyone will breathe a sigh of relief if you come out the other side a better person,” Alastor drawled.

“I’m not a *person*,” she growled. “I’m a monster.”

Vox cocked an eyebrow. “Is that what you really believe, or is that what everyone else told you?”

“That is what I am and always have been, right from the start,” she muttered.

“Sucks that you never had any choice in the matter,” Vox hummed. “Never had a chance to live like everyone else, to be seen as a person... until now.”

She hesitated. “...I’m afraid.”

“So were we,” Alastor said quietly as he squeezed Vox’s hand. “But it helps to have someone supporting you.”

She fell silent and watched them with a frown. “...You’re offering to help me?”

They nodded.

“Why?”

“Because how can you be expected to demonstrate kindness and empathy when you’ve never experienced them?” Vox said softly. “All you’ve ever known is people’s pain and fury. It’s time you felt something else.”

Her eyes widened and she suddenly looked... small.

“You’re trying to trick me,” she whispered. “I killed so many of your friends. I killed *you*. You’re... You’re luring me into a trap.”

Vox felt a tiny sliver of sympathy for her in his chest and he shook his head. “We have ulterior motives. We want the suffering to end. We want to stop living in fear of you. It just so happens that the road to that might benefit both of us and if that’s the case, then we might as well help you.”

She frowned at him then glanced at Alastor and swallowed. "...No. No, I don't trust you."

"Then I suppose this is your first trial," Alastor said. "Faith."

"Get out," she growled. "Get away from me. Liars! Deceivers! You're trying to manipulate me!" She glared at her bindings and snarled at Vox and Alastor. "Release me! Release me and I'll hunt you down! I'll torture you! I'll make you scream with agony and anguish!"

Alastor shook his head in disappointment and turned away from her, but Vox caught his wrist and observed her with a frown.

"Come on, Vox," Alastor said. "This is pointless."

"Faith goes both ways," Vox murmured slowly before he crossed his arms and frowned at her. "No, we won't release you. But we won't leave you either. You *can* do this, Roo. I have faith in you."

She blinked at him in stunned silence and seemed at a loss for words. Alastor stared at Vox, fascinated.

"My parents didn't believe in me very much," Vox said gently. "I had to learn everything on my own, like you. I guess I learned the wrong things because it earned me a spot in Hell, just like you earned a spot in Purgatory." He smiled. "But then I met a few people who cared about me, like Alastor and Rosie and Velvette - even Val. And I learned new things. And I guess those things were the *right* things because I've got this crappy square halo now."

He shook his head and clicked his tongue. "Angel or demon, it doesn't matter. I've realised that it doesn't matter what I look like, whether I'm in Hell or Heaven. Happiness isn't a place. You can still be lonely in paradise. Happiness to me is the people around me - the people who care about me. The people who value my ideas and opinions, the people who love me despite my faults, the people who pick me up when I'm down and laugh with me through the good times." He frowned sympathetically at Roo. "You've never had that, have you?"

She frowned at him.

“Would you like to see if it’s possible for you to have that?” he asked.

She turned away from him.

“That’s okay,” he said. “It’s a big decision. We can wait, right Al?”

Alastor blinked. “...Yes. Of course.”

“We’ll be right here,” Vox said patiently. “We aren’t going anywhere.”

Her shoulders tensed.

Vox’s heart beat a little quicker with anxiety.

“I can taste your fear,” she muttered after a while, back turned to him.

“Are you surprised?” Alastor asked. “After everything you’ve done?”

She shot him an icy look.

“Yet we’re still here,” Vox said quickly, throwing Alastor a reproachful look. “Because despite our anxiety, we want to help you.”

“And if I don’t want your help?” she demanded.

“Then you may ask us to leave.”

She fell quiet once more. After some time, she turned to them, looking rather weary. “If I were to trust you, what would you have me do? This place is unlike my original prison. How do I demonstrate the Virtues when there is nothing but darkness around me?”

“Well,” said Vox thoughtfully, “maybe that’s the point? Maybe this is a test of patience?”

“Or mercy,” Alastor said, eyebrows raised. He pointed at her coat. “You said you keep pieces of dead people’s souls like trophies. What happens if you release them?”

Roo frowned. “...I’m not sure.” She gripped her coat protectively. “They’re mine. You can’t have them. You may wear a halo now but you were an Overlord once. You collected many souls yourself.”

Alastor pulled a face and shook his head. “I don’t want them, you sadistic-”

Vox elbowed him hard in the ribs. “What Alastor means is... perhaps this is a trial of temperance. Mercy. End their suffering. Release them so that they may finally be at peace.”

“I’ve *earned* them,” she growled, retreating a step. “They’re *mine*.”

“They were never yours to take,” Vox said firmly. “Let them find peace. Feeding from their pain is one thing, but keeping them in an endless loop of suffering? It’s cruel. You have no use for them now that you can no longer feed from them. Have mercy.”

She fingered her coat then growled to herself and opened it. She lowered her head, the brim of her hat concealing her face, and the lights detached themselves from the material, burning brighter as they floated away slowly like lanterns and faded into the darkness.

A bell tolled twice and Roo startled. Vox and Alastor turned to find a set of gates behind them, two of seven green lights flicking on upon the left post.

“Two Virtues?” Roo asked in confusion.

“Temperance and Faith,” Alastor said slowly. “Faith in us.”

Vox smiled at her. “You trusted us. You took a leap of faith despite the uncertainty of what will happen to you at the end of the trials.”

Roo glanced down at herself. “...I don’t feel any different.”

“Then what have you got to lose?” Vox asked giddily as he held a hand out to her. “Come on, this will be easy!”

She stared at his outstretched hand.

And then, a small, tentative smile pulled at her lips as she took it, and he tugged her through the gates.

Chapter End Notes

Since you all asked so nicely, I have one last surprise up my sleeve for you ;)

Chapter 76: All Creatures Great And Small

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alastor would have been lying to himself if he said he wasn't unsettled by Roo's presence. Vox had thrown himself into the task of helping her complete the trials, but Alastor... Well, Alastor didn't trust her. She was bound to screw them over somehow.

He loved Vox with all of his heart, truly, but the man could be a little naive sometimes.

He stayed a step behind the pair, gaze focused on Roo. If she made a single move to hurt Vox, Alastor would be on her.

She knew he was watching. Every so often she would swivel her head slightly and catch sight of him through the corner of her eye and she would turn away again, listening to Vox chatter.

"We've been walking for over an hour," Roo muttered. "What is my next trial? Why is there nothing but darkness here?"

"It'll show up," Vox said optimistically. "You've just got to be patient."

"I've been patient," she growled. "I was trapped in the original Purgatory for *millennia*."

Vox watched her warily. "Maybe we should head back to the gates?"

She rounded on him with a snarl. "Are you purposefully leading me in circles?"

Vox recoiled and Alastor was by his side in a flash, baring his teeth at her, antlers growing and eyes flickering to dials in warning.

“Mind your manners,” Alastor hissed. “We could leave you here to starve, but we’ve decided to help you. Don’t make us regret that decision.”

“Are you forgetting that I control your *king*?” she growled.

A pained *squeak* caught their attention and Roo stilled, looking around carefully.

“What was that?” Vox asked.

She ignored him and squinted through the darkness before prowling away and coming to a halt a little distance from them. She frowned at the floor and that’s when Alastor spotted something moving at her feet. He gestured for Vox to follow him.

They stopped beside her, watching a little Hellrat take in one laboured breath after another as it lay curled on its side. Its hind legs were obviously broken and there were deep wounds in its back where it had been attacked by something much larger than itself. It was emaciated and it let out another squeak of pain.

Alastor had never been fond of rats, especially those in Hell. They were scruffy with rough, black fur, and they smelled of the sewer systems. They had a mean bite too. He wrinkled his nose a little and watched Vox visibly recoil from the ugly creature.

“How did you get in here?” Roo mumbled to herself.

“Must have crawled in after one of us when the portal opened,” Alastor muttered. “Best to put it out of its misery. Doesn’t look as though it’s long for this world anyway.”

Roo’s frown deepened and to Vox and Alastor’s surprise, she scooped the creature up gently and inspected it.

“I can feel its pain,” she murmured.

Alastor may not have liked the creatures, but he didn’t agree with prolonging their suffering. He scowled at her. “Quickly have your fill then destroy it.”

She ran a gentle finger between its ears and tilted her head. “It has been a long time since I fed on an animal. Humans were so much more... satisfying.” She frowned as it winced beneath her finger. “I forgot how pure an animal’s fear is. How innocent. Their pain is less complicated.”

She pursed her lips and Alastor studied her carefully. She looked... uneasy.

She turned to him and held the dying rat out to him.

“Fix her,” she demanded.

Her?

“...It’s vermin,” Alastor said, surprised.

She scowled at him. “She has a soul, just as you do. Heal her.”

Alastor blinked at her, lost. “...Why?”

Her lips drew into a thin line. “Because I ordered you to. Because you can heal and I can only destroy. Fix her.”

“A *please* wouldn’t hurt,” Vox piped up.

Roo shot him a sharp look and he held his hands up in defeat.

Alastor took the mangled creature off her, barely concealing his disgust. It took a few seconds to heal the rat and he shuddered as it rolled to its feet and shook itself. He could feel its tiny claws biting into his skin.

It watched him warily and Roo scooped it up and studied its thin face. It blinked at her and chittered its teeth before racing into her sleeve and hiding there.

She stared at the bulge in her sleeve and gently cupped her other hand beneath it, supporting it. There was a soft *squeak*.

A faint smile touched her lips. “Before humans came along, I used to live with the animals,” she whispered, voice a little distant. “I fed from them of course, but they used to come to me. They weren’t afraid of me. To them, I was another creature of the forest. Pain and fear and lust and fury... they were part of everyday life. Not like humans, who demonise those feelings. Humans, who say those feelings are *wrong*. That they should be avoided. Who call them *evil*.”

She lowered her head a little. “Who call *me* evil.” She petted the bulge in her sleeve and there was a quiet chitter before it began to move further along her arm. Finally, a tiny head popped out of her collar and looked at her in surprise. It hesitated, then sniffed at her, then apparently deemed her friendly as it scurried onto her shoulder and perched there.

“A shame I haven’t got any food for you, little one,” she murmured to it. It looked at her and tilted its head curiously, then ventured closer and put its small paws on her face.

Her smile grew and she tickled between its ears. It chittered at her again and closed its eyes, leaning into her touch.

“Chatty little thing, aren’t you?” she murmured.

She put her hands in her pockets after a moment, then startled and retrieved an apple from one of them. A deep red one, as fresh as the day it had been picked.

She huffed to herself and eyed the darkness around her. “Very funny,” she said before offering the fruit to the hungry rat. It stretched eagerly for its meal, nibbling excitedly at the skin and wrapping its tiny fingers around as much of the apple as possible as Roo held it still.

Alastor and Vox looked at each other, dumbfounded.

Once it had eaten its fill, she dropped the apple into her pocket again and the rat settled upon her shoulder once more, nuzzling against her jaw.

She closed her eyes as Alastor tried not to squirm. The *filth* those vermin carried...

“I’ve forgotten how sweet these creatures are. How intelligent.” She scowled. “I’ve spent too long with humans and angels and demons. You make everything so *complicated*. You’re so opinionated. So righteous. Why can’t you be more like them?”

She opened her eyes and stared thoughtfully at whatever was considered a floor here.

“Then again, I’m no better,” she mused. “I fell for your temptations. Sweeter meals. *Bigger* meals. I got greedy. Learned how to *induce* fear and pain and fury.”

She looked up at Alastor and Vox. “I didn’t even know I could feed on humiliation until you humans came along. It isn’t something animals really understand. I got curious. Perhaps a little too curious. Maybe I should have stayed away...” She huffed in amusement. “Showed a little *temperance*. I should have stuck with the animals. Perhaps I wouldn’t have landed in Purgatory if I had.”

Her gaze softened as the rat squeaked for her attention. “I liked the animals,” she whispered.

“Why didn’t you return to them once you figured out that humans were complicated?” Vox asked curiously.

It took a little while for her to respond. Finally, she lifted her gaze to meet Vox’s. “You looked like me. You could talk. I... I suddenly felt a little less lonely.”

Alastor’s shoulders sank as his heart ached with reluctant sympathy.

“I was... afraid of the angels. I had seen their power,” she confessed. “And then humans came along and you weren’t that powerful. But the angels were protecting you, so I had to get creative if I wanted to meet you. One of the angels, Lucifer, he seemed... more accepting of new things, of the unknown. I took a part of myself and made it into a seed and threw it into the Garden of Eden, hoping that he’d notice and of course, he noticed the tree that grew from it, with all of its beautiful fruit.”

She stroked the rat’s back. “He took a bite and enjoyed the taste and for the first time, I could *feel* an angel’s fears and humiliation and it was all so... complicated. I whispered to him carefully, wondering if he’d attack me or ignore me, but he came to me, in search of answers, bright-eyed and curious. I didn’t want him to be afraid of me and I wanted to meet you humans, so I lied to him. I told him that he’d eaten from the Fruit of Knowledge. That it granted free will and a deep understanding of the universe. I told him to share it with his humans.”

She grimaced. “But humans are not Archangels and everything went *wrong*. They began to doubt their safety in the world and they felt shame and fear and pain for the first time, and Lucifer didn’t understand, so he went to his brothers for help and when he told them what he’d done, they found me.”

She clenched her jaw. “I hadn’t meant to ruin everything. I just wanted to talk to them, to find out what they were. I tried to explain, I told them what I was, but the other Archangels... They were horrified. They didn’t understand, didn’t *want* to understand, and they cast the humans out of the Garden and they locked me up, and once they were finished, they threw Lucifer out of Heaven as punishment.”

She swallowed thickly. “I... I never meant to destroy everything.”

A tense silence fell between them and the rat chittered at Roo and patted her face.

“You told me that story once before,” Vox said after a moment. “But you didn’t tell it like that. You made yourself out to be the villain.”

She frowned bitterly. “I *am* the villain.”

Alastor heaved an internal sigh. He couldn’t believe that he was about to say this...

“It was an accident, my dear. One you were unfairly punished for.”

She blinked and looked up at him.

A bell tolled twice.

The gates appeared beside them, four of seven lights lit.

Roo straightened in shock and Alastor ventured over to them curiously, reading the words engraved beneath the new lights.

“Empathy and honesty,” he listed.

Vox counted on his fingers. “You spared the rat’s life and you told us the truth about your past.” He quirked a lopsided grin. “Well, you’re racing through this far quicker than we did.”

“Different trials,” she muttered, sounding rather subdued.

Suddenly, a golden portal opened beyond the gates and Lucifer’s head popped through it, looking very wide-eyed. He startled at the sight of Vox, Alastor, and Roo.

“Uh, okay, so twenty-four hours are up, but do you guys-”

“Give us another day,” Vox said quickly as he dragged Roo towards the gates.

Lucifer licked his lips. “...Alright, but do you have anything to do with-”

“Once we’re finished here, we’ll explain everything,” Alastor drawled as he waved dismissively at Lucifer. “Cheerio!”

“Wait! There’s some weird shit-”

“Twenty-four hours,” Vox interrupted. “I promise you can come get us after that.”

Lucifer opened and closed his mouth like a fish for a moment before he pulled a face and closed the portal without another word.

“You’re... choosing to stay,” Roo said slowly.

Vox and Alastor nodded.

“We’re on the home stretch,” Vox said cheerily. “Kindness, Love and Charity left.”

She smiled in amusement. “Lucifer seemed... a little harried, wouldn’t you say?”

“He always looks like that,” Alastor scoffed and Roo smirked knowingly. What she knew was anyone’s guess.

“I don’t know how I’m going to pass *Love*, ” Roo said. “I’m not like either of you. I’ve never been in love. I’ve never even had friends.”

Alastor and Vox glanced at her with matching frowns.

“Then perhaps you aren’t being tested on your love of another person,” said a small, feminine voice.

The trio froze and looked around quickly.

There was a quiet giggle. “On your shoulder.”

Roo’s gaze snapped to the rat and she bared her teeth at it when it waved at her.

“You’re part of Purgatory?” she hissed.

The rat nodded and yelped when she tried to smack it off her body. It scurried across the back of her coat and appeared on her other shoulder.

“We are here to help you!” it cried out desperately.

“You are my jail warden,” she snarled and she raised her hand again, inhaling sharply when it dove under her collar and into her sleeve again.

“No, no, no!” it squeaked. “We are your *guide*. But it appears that you have two others.” It poked its nose tentatively out from under her cuff and she narrowed her eyes at it.

“You held me prisoner.”

“You wouldn’t listen,” it protested. “We tried to help but you didn’t trust us.”

“You were created by the Archangels! Why would I trust you?”

“Because over time we saw your potential and we *told* you that we wanted to help!”

Vox and Alastor stared at the pair in fascination. It was like watching squabbling children.

“You kept me trapped,” Roo snarled.

“You were too stubborn to learn,” huffed the rat. “And you still aren’t listening!”

Roo pursed her lips and opened her palm and the rat crawled into it gingerly before crossing its arms - which looked awfully strange.

“I’m listening,” grumbled Roo.

“Good,” it said tersely before making itself comfortable in Roo’s palm. “Love does not have to be romantic. It doesn’t even have to be platonic. Love can be anything, from a love of life, to the love of a pet, to love of *oneself*.” It wrinkled its nose, ears lowering a fraction. “Something *you* have never felt. You need to learn to love what you are rather than resent everything that you are not.”

“I’m Evil,” she growled. “How am I supposed to love that?”

The rat waved a paw dismissively. “You are not Evil. You only believe that you are because that’s what you’ve been told.”

“I am The Root Of All Evil,” she said.

“Are you? Or is that a name you were given?”

Roo fell silent, blinking in confusion.

“What was your name before that?” asked the rat.

“I... I don’t know,” Roo confessed.

The rat smiled, ears pricking up. “Then perhaps you should figure it out.” It turned around in her palm then wiggled its rear and dove into her coat pocket - the one with the apple.

The sound of quiet munching filled the air.

Roo glared at her pocket before fishing the rat out again. “What do you mean?” she demanded.

It tilted its head at her and squeaked.

She narrowed her eyes. “I know you aren’t really a rat.”

It chittered at her innocently, then smirked.

“Fine,” she growled. “Be like that.” She thrust it into her pocket once more and it squealed in surprise.

Alastor noticed how she didn’t throw the rat or try to destroy it. That, of course, wasn’t any of his business and he kept his mouth firmly shut.

He startled when the darkness faded to reveal a dark forest, and his eyes blew wide, ears alert as his heart began to race with panic. Vox was behind him immediately, wrapping a protective arm around him, splaying a hand over his stomach, whispering softly into his hair.

“Breathe,” Vox murmured. “I’ve got you. I’ve got you, Al.”

Alastor pressed into Vox instinctively, gaze darting around the forest in search of monsters. In search of *men*.

Vox held him close as Alastor pulled himself together.

“Nothing’s going to hurt you,” Vox mumbled. “You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

Alastor squeezed his eyes shut and focused on Vox’s warmth, on the soft hum of electronics and the comforting pressure at his chest and stomach where Vox tightened his grip.

He was safe. He was with Vox and he was *safe*.

His breaths slowed as Vox’s lips brushed the back of his neck. Being in Vox’s arms was like being wrapped in a blanket; warm and comforting. It was silly, but he felt as though nothing could touch him when Vox held him like this.

“You okay?” Vox mumbled against his neck after a few moments and Alastor nodded wordlessly, smiling when Vox squeezed him and kissed his shoulder before finally releasing him. He didn’t stray too far though and he laid a protective hand over Alastor’s back, which Alastor immediately leaned into.

They looked around and noticed that Roo had disappeared.

“Roo?” Vox called. “Where are you?”

Alastor’s ears pricked up, listening intently, and he scowled at the silence, feeling uneasy. What was she up to? Was she plotting against them?

A crow cawed and Vox and Alastor whipped around, searching the trees and frowning at the bird tilting its head at them. They wandered slowly through the forest and came to a halt when they finally found Roo crouching beside a young fox as it sniffed at her curiously.

It edged closer to her until she was able to touch its ear, and a small smile pulled at her lips. Behind her, a blackbird hopped closer, chirping at her almost in query.

Vox shifted and a twig snapped beneath his foot, and the wild creatures looked at him fearfully before bolting.

Roo sighed and stood and said nothing as Vox and Alastor carefully stepped into view.

Vox grimaced. “Sorry,” he said.

She ignored him and turned away, attention caught by something in the distance. She frowned and headed towards the figure, forcing Vox and Alastor to trot after her.

Their eyes widened when the figure grew clearer, its white wings held high and proud. It looked at them, surprised, and waved gingerly.

“Lucifer?” Vox muttered and Alastor shrugged, equally confused.

He looked young and his eyes weren’t pooling with millennia of exhaustion and betrayal and anguish. He smiled brightly, innocently, and as Roo neared the Archangel, Alastor threw a hand out to stop Vox from following.

Their presence had interrupted Roo with the animals, and something in his gut told him that following Roo now would interrupt this interaction too. Vox looked at him curiously and Alastor stepped back.

“Let’s... watch. Lucifer looks young here. Very young. I don’t think this is the time to introduce ourselves,” Alastor said slowly. “This is *Roo’s* trial, after all.”

Vox stilled obediently and Alastor’s ears swivelled towards the pair, listening.

“You spoke to me,” Lucifer said as Roo approached. “Through the fruit. How did you do that?”

Roo regarded him warily. “That fruit is special. It grants knowledge. Wisdom of the universe. It can do all kinds of things.” It sounded as though she was reading from a script, as though she had said these words before.

Lucifer raised his eyebrows. “It can? Is it... Is it dangerous? I’m supposed to protect the humans inside the garden. I can’t let anything dangerous reach them.”

“It isn’t dangerous,” Roo said, subdued. “...You should share it with them.”

Lucifer frowned thoughtfully. “I suppose I could. I think they’d like it.” He brightened. “And they’d definitely like to know more about the universe!” He held a hand out for Roo to shake. “Lucifer. A pleasure to meet you.”

She stared at his hand and he grinned. “You’re supposed to tell me your name now,” he said with a teasing wink.

Roo licked her lips, unable to meet his gaze. “I don’t have one.”

His smile wavered and he tilted his head. “You must. Everyone and everything has a name.”

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t have a name. I’ve never been given one. Are they that important?”

Lucifer looked scandalised. “Of course they are! What am I supposed to call you if you don’t have a name?” He glanced behind her. “Do your friends have names?”

Roo blinked and looked back at Vox and Alastor, and confusion danced in her gaze for a moment, as though she had forgotten that they were there.

“I... I’m not sure,” she lied.

“Do they want to join us?” He squinted at them. “...What are they? What does the blue one have over his head?”

Alastor pushed Vox backwards and they retreated further away from Roo and Lucifer, deeper into the woods.

“They’re shy,” Roo said before turning back to Lucifer. “Like the deer in the forest.”

Lucifer smiled at her. “I like the deer. I like their big antlers.” He lifted his chin proudly. “I designed them, by the way. The deer, I mean. I designed a lot of animals. Including ducks!”

Roo hummed and Lucifer eyed her for a moment. “Y’know, I’m pretty good at naming stuff. At least... I think I am. Not like Gabriel, who just names things by their colour. Blackbird, bluetit, bluejay, red berry, blackberry...” Lucifer wrinkled his nose. “No imagination.”

He looked at her hopefully. “Perhaps... I could name you? What... What exactly *are* you?”

She frowned and averted her gaze. “I’m not sure.”

“You look kind of human,” Lucifer said. “Or maybe like an angel without wings. Well, except for your eyes, which are very pretty, by the way.”

Roo raised her eyebrows, glancing at him in surprise. He grinned at her.

“Do you have any magic?”

She hesitated. “I... feed off emotions. Bad ones.”

Lucifer frowned. “Does it hurt?”

She looked away. “Only if I want it to.”

“No, I mean does it hurt *you*?” Lucifer asked. “I can’t imagine it feeling very good to only feed off bad emotions.”

Roo swallowed thickly, staring at him with wide eyes. “I...” She fell silent, looking very lost, and she glanced back around at Vox and Alastor for a moment before turning to Lucifer again. “It’s... heavy.” She scrunched her nose and shook her head, unable to find the right word. “Complicated.”

Lucifer smiled patiently at her. “How does it work?”

She hesitated again, thinking. “I’m... not entirely sure. I just... do it. I have these tendrils that *suck* up emotion, I suppose. I don’t always use them, but they help me search a wider area for stray emotions.”

Lucifer perked up. “Like how plant roots search for water?”

“...Yes. I suppose,” Roo said slowly.

Lucifer snapped his fingers. “That could be your name! Root!”

A smile touched Roo’s lips. “...Alright.”

“It’s a shame that I can’t invite you into the Garden,” Lucifer said, pouting. “But I don’t think I’m allowed to.” He blinked. “Hey! If I share the Fruit of Knowledge with Adam and Eve and Lilith, do you think you’ll be able to talk to them? Maybe if we prove that you’re trustworthy, I could show you around Eden?”

“I’d like that,” Roo said quietly and Lucifer beamed before taking to the air and flying away.

Roo’s small smile faded and she turned away in silence and headed towards Vox and Alastor.

She frowned when a young Michael, Gabriel, and an angel that Vox and Alastor didn’t recognise landed behind her, Lucifer’s shoulder clutched painfully tight in Michael’s grip and the shorter Archangel looking between his brothers worriedly.

“What are you?” Michael demanded. “What did you do to the humans? What did you do to Lucifer?”

“Nothing,” Lucifer insisted. “Mikey, she didn’t do anything wrong. It must have been the fruit. It must have been unripened or... or *expired*.”

Michael tightened his grip on Lucifer’s shoulder. “That tree wasn’t supposed to be there. She must have planted it. Infected it with something. Infected *you*.”

Lucifer scowled and looked to Roo expectantly, even though her back was turned. “Tell him that isn’t true, Root. Tell him that you only wanted to talk to the humans. Tell him that we’re *friends*.”

Silence fell between them for a long moment before Roo closed her eyes and turned slowly to face the angels.

“I planted the tree,” she confessed and Lucifer’s eyes widened in confusion as the other angels glowered at her. “I wanted to see what humans were. I took a piece of myself and made it into a seed and I threw it into the Garden, and a tree grew from it.” She looked at them tiredly. “It gets lonely, talking to creatures that never talk back.”

Lucifer’s shoulders sagged a little.

The other angels bared their teeth. “You’ve soiled them,” Gabriel growled. “Soiled our brother. *Violated* them, the very blood running through their veins.” He clenched his fists. “Monster.”

“Root isn’t a monster,” Lucifer protested. “She just... made a mistake.”

“She has *infected* you with her Evil,” said the copper and green-winged angel that Vox and Alastor didn’t recognise but could guess was probably Raphael. “Has invited fear and shame and grief into paradise. She needs to be destroyed!”

Roo watched unflinchingly as the three Archangels summoned their blades and started towards her.

“No!” Lucifer snapped, but Michael shoved him backwards.

“Be silent, brother. She is influencing your mind, trying to turn you against us.” He shot her a disdainful look. “You call her *Root* and you are right. She is The Root Of All Evil.”

Lucifer paused, looking conflicted. He threw Roo a doubtful glance and she met his gaze before tilting her chin up.

“You can’t destroy me,” she said. “I can’t be killed. I feed off pain and fear and lust and fury. Now that I have tasted your brother, I can feed off your anger too.”

Lucifer stared at her, betrayed, and before she could explain herself any further, Michael lunged at her with his sword. She jerked backwards with narrowed eyes. “Leave me alone,” she said. “I can’t help my nature. I am what I am, just as you are Archangels.”

“You have destroyed *everything*,” Michael hissed and he lunged at her again, forcing her backwards.

“If you continue, I’ll be forced to hurt you,” Roo said and Michael tightened his grip on his sword and slashed through her shoulder.

She hissed in pain before summoning her roots, and the Archangels’ eyes blew wide as the roots surged towards them.

The forest flickered, fading out of view and taking the Archangels with it.

Roo scowled into the darkness around her and wrapped her arms around herself as best she could whilst they were chained, and she glowered at her healed shoulder.

Alastor and Vox crept towards her in silence.

“I didn’t have a name,” she muttered. “The Archangels named me. They made me into what I am.”

Her pocket wriggled and a tiny head poked out of it.

“You didn’t have a name,” agreed the rat. “Because you didn’t need one. You were happy without one, but you didn’t mind Lucifer’s name for you.”

“Michael twisted it,” she growled.

“And *you* lived up to that twisted name,” said the rat sternly.

“They attacked me,” she hissed. “I had to defend myself!”

“Not all of them,” said the rat. “Not at first.”

The darkness shimmered and shook and Roo, Vox, and Alastor found themselves watching a battle sequence between a past Roo and the Archangels. Whilst Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael fought hard against a terrified Roo, Lucifer lingered behind, seeming torn.

Gabriel landed beside him, blood trickling down his lip, and he gripped his collar with a snarl. “Why don’t you fight beside us?”

“What if it really was an accident?” Lucifer asked softly.

Gabriel dragged Lucifer closer. “Has she got that much of a hold on you that you would betray your own brothers?”

Lucifer blinked, eyes widening.

“Prove your loyalty or we will protect the Garden from *you*, brother,” Gabriel growled and he shoved Lucifer into the fray.

Reluctantly, Lucifer summoned his sword.

The scene froze, as though being played on a television screen.

Roo frowned and the rat looked up at her patiently.

“He was threatened,” she said slowly as though the thought had never occurred to her before. “He didn’t want to fight.”

“He explained that to you,” said the rat. “You didn’t believe him.”

The scene ahead of them appeared to... fast-forward, racing through the fight and skipping to a trembling Roo trapped in a very, very dark place.

A bruised and bloodied Lucifer stepped into frame, staring warily at Roo as she dug her nails into her own skin and bared her teeth at him like a wild animal.

“You didn’t mean to... *infect* them, did you?” Lucifer asked quietly. “You didn’t mean to infect me, did you?”

She glowered at him. “Maybe I did,” she snarled, tone overflowing with hurt and fear. “Maybe I wanted you to suffer.”

Lucifer frowned. “I don’t believe you.” He edged closer. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to trap you here, but I didn’t know how else to prove that you weren’t... *influencing* me.” He paused. “I can talk to them. Get them to release you.”

“Liar,” she hissed angrily. “Coward. *Traitor*. You aren’t here to help me. You’re here to trick me, to taunt me. Go away.”

“No,” said Lucifer, shaking his head quickly. “I don’t think you’re Evil like they said. I think... I think everyone is just a little afraid and we’ve never seen anything like you before and-”

“And so you want to destroy me because you don’t understand me,” Roo snarled. “But you don’t know how to do that, so you’ve locked me in here until you figure it out.” Her nails bit deeper into the skin of her arms, until blood trickled down her flesh. “You’re here for information. You’re trying to fish for weaknesses.”

“No,” protested Lucifer, but she suddenly pounced on him, clawing at him like a rabid animal as she screamed.

Her roots snaked around him, pulling, squeezing, and he writhed and cried out in agony as he fought against her. He shifted shapes, desperate to free himself, but she dragged him back each time, littering his skin with bruises and blood until he was forced to bite and claw and kick at her. Their magic clashed violently, sliding around each other, wounding one another, whipping and strangling and carving deep marks into each other’s bodies, and they struggled for a long while before Lucifer finally broke free and stared at her, betrayed, before vanishing.

Roo screamed in anguish.

The scene faded, leaving Alastor, Vox, Roo, and Purgatory 2.0 in the form of a rat.

“When the other Archangels questioned him about his wounds and he revealed that he’d been to see you, they, too, called him a traitor and cast him out of the Garden, out of *Heaven*, for betraying them,” said the rat.

Roo remained quiet.

“Lucifer didn’t believe you were evil until you proved his brothers *correct*. You attacked him.”

Roo scowled. “They imprisoned me. I was afraid.”

“And now you are the beast they said you were. The monster lurking in the shadows. A bringer of pain and despair,” said the rat quietly.

Roo glared at the darkness. “...Yes.”

“But that isn’t what you want, is it?”

“What I *want* doesn’t matter,” Roo growled. “It never has. I will always be the monster everyone fears.”

“If you’re a monster, why did Lucifer defend you? Why did he come to see you in Purgatory?”

Roo frowned, pursing her lips. “That was a long time ago.”

The rat looked up at her, seeming to smile. “Then you admit that you’ve changed?”

She threw it a tired glance. “Yes.”

“And in doing so,” continued the rat, “you admit that you weren’t the monster you are now. You became the very thing they said you already were because you were *afraid*.”

She clenched her fists. “Do you have a point or are you just trying to show me how far I’ve *fallen*?”

“Our point,” said the rat impatiently, “is that you hate the beast that you’ve become, but that wasn’t always the case. You were fond of the animals and you found peace in nature. You were curious and cunning and excited about humans once, and you enjoyed talking to Lucifer because he wasn’t afraid of you.”

Roo grimaced. “I’m not that person anymore.”

“But you could be,” insisted the rat. “Have faith in yourself. Learn to love what you actually are instead of what others *think* you are.”

“I have tortured so many souls,” Roo murmured. “I can never return to what I once was.”

“Then you will be trapped here for the rest of eternity,” said the rat harshly.

“So be it,” muttered Roo.

The rat’s ears fell and its gaze darted from left to right. “Alright. We’ll come back to this,” it murmured before it scampered up Roo’s arm and onto her shoulder. It gestured into the distance at a golden light and Roo tilted her head curiously before heading towards the glow, Alastor and Vox trotting after her silently.

They came to a halt at the sight of bruised and bloodied Lucifer kneeling at his brothers’ feet, his wrists chained to his neck and his wings weighed down by thick black chains that wound

around and around the great limbs. His ankles were also bound together by the same black chains and he glanced up at his brothers pleadingly, unable to stand.

“She has infected you,” Michael snarled. “Look at yourself, Lucifer. How can you lie to us and claim that you aren’t possessed?”

Lucifer shook his head. “I promise that my thoughts and actions are my own! She has no hold over me!”

“You tempted the humans into *sin*,” Gabriel growled. “Your loyalty is no longer to Heaven.”

Lucifer shook his head frantically and his chains rattled. “I *am* loyal to Heaven! To you! I swear!”

“How can you say that?” asked Raphael incredulously. “Look at your chains, brother! Look how she controls you.”

Lucifer struggled against his restraints. “I’m not possessed!”

“You are a lost cause,” Michael said, closing his eyes in disappointment. “You are no longer welcome here, brother. Find your humans and leave with them.”

Tears shone in Lucifer’s eyes. “Please don’t do this.”

Michael gave him a pained look. “Go,” he said quietly. “Take her chains with you.”

Lucifer trembled. “I’m your brother. Please don’t turn me away. Don’t cast me out.”

“We can’t trust you,” Gabriel said gently. “Leave, Lucifer, and don’t return.”

“...But we’re family,” Lucifer whispered. “You can’t just turn your backs on me.”

“You turned your back on us first,” Raphael said and Lucifer trembled harder and writhed against his chains.

“Please don’t abandon me,” he whimpered. “I... I love you. All of you. If I’m tainted, *help me.*”

Michael frowned. “Enough, Lucifer. You must leave.”

“But I’m not possessed!” Lucifer cried.

“Leave, or we will force you to leave,” Michael said sternly as he summoned his sword, and Lucifer gasped and tried to crawl away from him, but his efforts proved futile due to his chains.

Roo scowled and glanced at the rat. “A poor metaphor,” she said drily. “I never chained him.”

“He is on your chain right now,” pointed out the rat as it watched the scene play out. “And you sealed his fate when you attacked him. You proved his brothers correct instead of standing by Lucifer’s side and letting him defend you. You may as well have wrapped him in chains.”

Roo’s eyebrows drew deeper as she watched Michael advance on Lucifer, sword raised. Lucifer cowered from him.

Roo clicked her fingers and the chains disappeared, and Lucifer gasped and scrambled to his feet, quickly taking flight as Michael swung the sword towards him. The Archangels disappeared and the surrounding darkness invaded every space once more.

“What do you think the Archangels will do if they see a very real chain around his neck?” asked the rat. “Time and time again you have punished and betrayed the one angel that had faith in you. You have taken his home from him and killed his wife. You tortured his daughter and destroyed the new home that he carved for himself. You desecrated his kingdom and now you have taken his freedom.” The rat frowned at her. “When will his suffering be enough for you?”

Roo was silent for a long moment before she held out a palm and a black chain appeared within it.

Suddenly, she gripped the chain with her tied hands and snapped the links. The chain flickered and crumbled to dust.

“He is free,” Roo murmured.

The rat smiled.

A bell tolled and the gates appeared beside them, this time with five green lights upon the left post.

Roo headed through them, subdued, and Alastor squinted at what was written beneath the new light.

Kindness.

He and Vox followed her through and Roo frowned at the floor, looking conflicted as she wrapped her arms around herself.

“Let’s try *Love* again, shall we?” the rat began, but a golden portal suddenly opened and Lucifer’s surprised face popped through it.

He looked at Roo and opened his mouth before seeming to lose his words and his gaze flicked instead to Alastor and Vox.

“Time’s up,” he said quietly.

They looked at Roo, who eyed the portal with interest.

She stepped towards it and Lucifer stared at her in alarm and the rat leapt out of her pocket and sat on the floor, watching her.

She frowned at it. “What are you doing?”

“You wish to escape,” it said.

“You haven’t finished the trials,” Vox pointed out.

“I can’t,” Roo snapped. “I’ll never pass Love. Nor will I pass Charity - What is there for me to sacrifice?”

“If that is how you feel,” said the rat solemnly and she glowered at it.

“You can’t stop me.”

“No,” it agreed. “Not with a gaping portal like that. You may escape if you wish.”

She took another step towards the portal then hesitated.

“You’ve already passed five trials,” Alastor said softly.

She squared her jaw and glared at him. “You don’t understand what this place does-” She cut herself off and blinked as she glanced between Alastor and Vox, and she averted her gaze, embarrassed.

“We’re well aware of how it feels to be trapped here,” Vox growled. “Be grateful that *this* Purgatory is so willing to help you. Be grateful that these trials aren’t as *violating*. ”

Alastor slipped his hand into Vox’s, squeezing comfortingly and Vox held on tightly.

Roo’s mouth drew into a thin line. “You’ll leave and I’ll be alone again. Like last time. Like always.”

“You were never really alone,” said the rat and it smiled weakly. “You just never viewed us as company.”

A frown marred Roo’s expression. “You’re a programme. You aren’t a person.”

The rat shuffled its paws. “If that is how you see us,” it said quietly.

Roo blinked. “Are you a person?”

“We aren’t sure what we are,” it mumbled. “We can learn and adapt and we have *some* emotions, but we are confined to this place. We *are* this place. Yet, we have memories of the old Purgatory too. Memories of every soul that visited us, every soul that *perished*. We... grieve for them.” Its ears flattened and it stared at its own paws and wrapped its tail around itself.

“I used some of the old code to create you,” Lucifer explained after a moment. “Perhaps that is why you remember the original Purgatory?”

The rat lifted its gaze to Lucifer. “What are we?” it asked softly.

Lucifer blinked. “...Perhaps I made you a little too curious. Too... emotional.”

“Why give us emotions at all?” it demanded. “If we are merely a prison?”

Lucifer’s gaze softened. “To make you compassionate. Empathetic. You aren’t just a prison. I made you this way with the hope that you could guide Roo to redemption when the other Archangels wanted you to be her jailor. You were always going to be capable of learning and adapting to her magic, I just injected a little personality into you.” He bit his lip. “Perhaps I injected a little too much.”

Roo stared at the rat with wide eyes and it glanced back at her, ears lowering further.

“Then we are neither a person nor a programme. We are something in between. Something... less.”

“Shit,” muttered Lucifer, shoulders sagging. “Way too much emotion.”

“You’re perfect,” Roo said suddenly, surprising everyone. She studied the rat, looking intrigued. “You’re like me, without a soul. I’ve never met anyone without a soul or grace or darkness. You’re... different.”

A frown touched the rat’s face. “...And that’s... good?”

“I don’t think it’s good or bad,” mused Roo. “I think it just... is.” She paused and cast her gaze briefly to the portal before returning her attention to the rat again. “Come with me. We could live together in the forests on Earth with the animals. Neither of us would have to be alone. I could show you all of Earth.”

The rat smiled sadly. “We cannot leave this place. We are part of the very firmament.” It wrapped its tail tighter around itself. “You, however, may leave. We will not stop you.” It glanced at Lucifer. “We cannot say the same for them, however. They may try.”

Once again, Roo hesitated. They all knew that there was very little anyone could do if she chose to flee Purgatory. She wasn’t exactly easy to trap and Purgatory had been their last shot.

“You’ll remain here for all eternity if I leave?” she asked.

The rat nodded.

Licking her lips, Roo slowly stepped away from the portal. “Loneliness is a terrible thing,” she whispered. “It would be silly for us both to be alone.”

The rat brightened, ears perking up again. “...You’re choosing to stay?”

Roo hesitated then nodded. “I still have two trials left. You can help me with them.” She suddenly whipped around to face Lucifer. “If I complete the trials, what happens to her? What happens to Purgatory?”

“*Her*’?” echoed the rat.

“...The programme ends,” Lucifer said.

“She dies?” Roo demanded.

“*She*’?” whispered the rat, looking lost.

“It will have fulfilled its function,” said Lucifer slowly.

Roo clenched her fists. “But she’s a *person*. She can think and feel and-” She shook her head angrily as the rat stared at her in awe. “Can’t you fix it?”

“Purgatory is a *place*,” Lucifer said helplessly. “A piece of magical code. I can’t make a person out of that.”

The rat shrank down and Roo bristled. “Then you are *useless*,” she hissed before glancing down at the rat.

“Purgatory offered us an option last time,” Alastor said slowly as he looked at Vox. “To stop us from completing the trials. A... *bubble* of sorts.”

Vox brightened. “Yeah... I was in one of them. It could create an entire world to keep you living in a paradise of your choosing. None of it was real, but... perhaps that wouldn’t matter so much to you?”

Roo’s brows pulled together and she turned to the rat. “...You offered me that more than once in the original Purgatory. Can you still do that?”

A little tongue poked out of the rat’s mouth. “...Yes. We think so.”

Roo straightened. “Then it is settled. I shall remain here.”

Lucifer raised his eyebrows. “And what will you eat if you don’t complete the trials? You’ll starve here.”

“You created us with emotion,” said the rat. “Empathy, compassion, sorrow, grief... Root may feed on us.”

“No,” said Roo sternly. “No, I won’t do that. I will cause you misery and suffering.”

“A sacrifice we are willing to make to share your company,” said the rat gently. “A fair trade for the sacrifice you have just made.”

A bell tolled and Roo whipped around to see the gates nearby, six of seven lights now lit.

“I... I don’t understand,” said Roo.

“You sacrificed your freedom to stay with Purgatory,” Lucifer said, stunned. “*Charity.*”

“Then there is only one trial left before she...” Roo trailed off, looking concerned, and the rat smiled at her warmly before scarpering towards the gates. “Wait!”

“Come, sweet Root,” laughed the rat. “Before you accidentally destroy us! We have a paradise to create!”

Roo inhaled sharply and stared at the rat’s retreating figure with the sort of excitement that no one had seen in her before. She turned to Lucifer, Alastor, and Vox.

“...Thank you,” she said quietly. She paused. “And I... I’m sorry. For everything. I never meant to-” She cut herself and shook her head, scowling. “No, I did mean to. I never meant to hurt the humans in the Garden, but after that... Well...” She raised her gaze to Lucifer. “Enjoy your second chance,” she said cryptically.

And Lucifer seemed to *understand*, for his eyes widened and he inhaled sharply. “*You...?*”

Roo smiled weakly.

He studied her for a moment before he stepped through the portal and carefully touched the bindings at her wrists. He muttered something under his breath and her restraints fell away after the sigils upon them burned a bright golden.

She rubbed her wrists and met his gaze one last time before chasing after the rat and passing through the gates.

She promptly vanished.

Lucifer slowly slid his gaze to Vox and Alastor, looking rather lost.

“Uh... So, just a warning... There have been a few *changes* over the last forty-eight hours,” he said once he had gathered his thoughts.

Alastor and Vox shared a wary glance before Alastor narrowed his eyes.

“What sort of changes?”

Chapter End Notes

So finally, we learn Roo's story!

One chapter left to tie everything in a pretty bow - I promised you a happy ending after all, so get ready for tooth rotting, diabetes-inducing sweetness ;)

Chapter 77: Happily Ever After

Chapter Notes

Warnings at bottom

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The first thing Vox noticed when he stepped through the portal was the queen.

Queen Lilith - apparently alive and looking extremely confused and *very* traumatised - clutched at her daughter like one might clutch at a childhood teddy bear during a mental breakdown. Charlie sobbed into her chest and Lilith stared at Vox and Alastor hollowly, clearly lost in her own mind.

The second thing Vox noticed was the moth-demon in the far corner of the room, staring brokenly into space as he wrapped his arms around himself.

Vox froze. “Val?”

Valentino raised his gaze slowly to Vox and it seemed to take an age for a spark of recognition to light his eyes.

“...Vox?” he choked out.

Vox’s heart twisted and clenched and he suddenly felt nauseous. What kind of sick illusion was this?

“He’s real,” Lucifer said quietly. “They all are.” He cast his wife a pained glance. “They remember everything, right to the end.”

Vox swallowed thickly and stared at Valentino for a long moment before a gentle hand touched his back.

“Go on,” whispered Alastor.

And suddenly, Vox was running, tears pooling in his digital eyes, and he threw his arms around Valentino and buried his face into his chest as he hid the overwhelming emotion playing across his screen. He was relieved and angry and grief-stricken and *happy* and- and-

Strong arms wrapped tightly around him as Valentino curled over him and Vox felt something cool and wet drip down the back of his neck.

“I’m sorry,” Valentino whimpered. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry for everything I did. I’m sorry for what I put you through. I’m sorry for all the vile *shit* I-”

“Stop,” whispered Vox softly. “Just stop.” He squeezed Valentino. “We’ll figure it out. We’ll fix it. We’ll fix all of it. I’m so fucking happy to see you again, Val. I thought you were gone.”

Valentino frowned in confusion. “...You are?”

Vox nodded. “I missed you.”

“You did?”

Vox pulled back to frown at him. “Of course I did, Val. I didn’t even... I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye. I thought I’d be able to save you and then she showed me your *corpse* and I-” He cut himself off, haunted by memories. “I grieved for you. You’ve been such a huge part of my afterlife.”

Valentino’s antennae lowered. “I was terrible to you.”

“No, we were both hurting and we were too broken to see it,” Vox said firmly before he met Valentino’s gaze. “I love you, Val. It has taken me far too long to realise that. I love you and I should have treated you better and I’m *sorry* I didn’t save you.”

Valentino stared at Vox with wide eyes before flicking his gaze to Alastor. “I... I don’t understand. I thought you loved Alastor?” His antennae lowered further. “You two are good together. You always were.”

“No one said love was simple,” Vox said with a weak smile. “I love Alastor, of course I do. But that doesn’t mean I don’t love you too. You mean a lot to me, Val. Losing you made me feel...” He swallowed thickly. “It hurt.”

Valentino studied Vox for a moment. “I thought you’d hate me after everything I did to you.” He frowned. “I chopped you up. I put a bomb in you. I ignored your pleas for me to stop. I hurt you, made you feel less than a person-”

“And I still fucking love you,” Vox interrupted. “After all of that. I love you despite everything we said to each other, everything we did to each other, everything we put each other through.”

Realisation brightened Valentino’s eyes as Alastor strolled over, standing beside Vox silently. He glanced between them, antennae rising.

“...But you aren’t *in love* with me,” he said slowly.

Vox managed a smile.

“You love me but you aren’t *in love* with me,” Valentino said again, testing out the words. “You care for me and you want me around but you don’t... you don’t want to *sleep* with me. You just...”

“I want you in my afterlife,” Vox said, taking Valentino’s lower pair of hands. “I *love* you.”

Valentino’s breath hitched quietly, cheeks flushing. “You’ve never said... No one has ever... It isn’t about sex?”

Vox shook his head. “I missed you, not your dick.”

“...Fuck. No one has ever wanted me around for *me*,” whimpered Valentino.

“And what am I?” Velvette demanded as she edged towards them with a scowl. “A fucking *potato*?”

Valentino snapped his gaze to her and she frowned at him warily. He shrunk in on himself. “Vel, I don’t know where to begin.”

“You can start with a fucking ‘*sorry for shooting you*, ’” she snapped, crossing her arms.

“I’m sorry,” Valentino said quickly as he glanced between Velvette and Vox. “I got so...” He flicked his gaze to Alastor, who arched an eyebrow at him. “I got jealous. And possessive. And I’m starting to realise that I didn’t need to.”

“You went fucking crazy,” Velvette huffed.

“Sí,” agreed Valentino quietly. “I’m sorry.”

Velvette glowered at him before her lower lip wobbled and she suddenly threw her arms around Valentino. He caught her easily and held her close.

“I’m so used to being used for my body that I forgot that isn’t all I’m good for,” Valentino whispered. He glanced at Vox. “I may be stupid, but it turns out even I can learn a few things from Purgatory.”

“You aren’t stupid, Val,” Vox said gently and Valentino wrinkled his nose before squeezing Velvete tighter.

“When Vox and Al said you were gone...” Velvete sniffed. “You’re an asshole but, *damn it*, I missed you.”

He stroked her hair and frowned down at her. “I thought I needed a lover for someone to truly care about me, but I think I was wrong. I think I just needed a couple of good friends,” he murmured as he glanced at Vox. Then, he flicked his gaze to Alastor. “...Maybe even three?”

Alastor hummed. “We’ll see.”

“That isn’t a *no*,” Valentino said hopefully.

“It isn’t,” agreed Alastor.

Finally, Velvete released him and Valentino narrowed his eyes at Vox and Alastor, raking his gaze carefully over their forms. “Are you... Are you *angels*?”

“You are so *blind*,” Velvete said and Valentino blinked at her, startled, before snapping his gaze back to Vox and Alastor.

“How the fuck were you two *redeemed*?”

Vox and Alastor glanced at each other.

“It’s a long story,” Vox grumbled. “We aren’t happy about it.”

“I’m so glad you’ve had your touching reunion and all,” piped up a new voice, “but do you think maybe you could get the fuck out of this hotel now?”

They turned to an angry Angel Dust, whose fists were clenched and whose eyes were swirling with a combination of fury and fear. Beside him, Husk flicked his tail irritably, gaze narrowed.

Valentino’s shoulders sagged. “Angel, I... I can’t even *begin* to tell you how sorry I am-”

“No, you can’t,” growled Angel. “Get the fuck out of my home. You don’t own me anymore, dickhead. So, you can get the fuck out of my life and stay far away from me.” He trembled with anxious rage.

Valentino’s antennae drooped and he took a step towards Angel but stopped when the spider-demon backed up.

“I’ll never be able to earn your forgiveness,” said Valentino quietly, “but I want you to know that I *am* sorry, Angie. We... We could have been happy and I ruined that.”

“Yeah, you did,” Angel spat and his nails bit into his palms. “Y’know, I was so fucking ecstatic when they said you were dead, when my chain broke. When they said you’d never come back, I *celebrated*.” He glared at Valentino hatefully. “But nothing good ever lasts, does it? Not for me. Well, I won’t be your little plaything anymore.”

He scowled at Vox. “If you want to give him the porn studio back, fine. But I quit. I won’t *ever* be under the same roof as him again and I definitely won’t work with him-”

“The studio is yours,” Vox interrupted gently. “I’m not taking it away from you, Angel.”

Angel hesitated. “I won’t work with him-”

“I’m not asking you to.”

Valentino chuckled awkwardly. “I think I lost the right to work alongside Vox and Vel when I put a bomb in one of them and beat the other unconscious.” He tilted his head curiously. “I didn’t think you’d stay in the studio once you were free.”

Angel lifted his chin defiantly. “What? I’m good at being a director. I can bring in the money, just like you did. *And* I don’t treat my employees like *shit*. And I don’t fucking *rape them* or drug them or force them to ‘take ten dicks before lunch’.”

Valentino flinched and retreated a step. “I think... I think I should go.”

“Yeah, you fucking *should*,” Angel bit out and Valentino looked at him brokenly.

“...I really am sorry, Angel. For everything. You deserved better.”

Angel swallowed thickly as Husk’s tail wound around his leg. “You’re right about that. I deserve a lot better than *you*.”

Valentino winced before managing a weak smile. “I’m happy for you, Angie. Really.” His smile widened a fraction. “You did what I couldn’t, what I wasn’t strong enough to do. You *broke free*. Made a better man of yourself. Broke the cycle.” He glanced around the hotel. “Look how many people care for you. Look how many people *trust* you.” His gaze softened. “I’m proud of you, Anthony. Whatever that’s worth.”

He turned away and shuffled towards the main doors, leaving Angel to stare after him, stunned.

“If you expect me to *forgive* you,” Angel called after him almost desperately and Valentino glanced over his shoulder and shook his head.

“That’s the last thing I expect from you, amorcito.”

Angel’s shoulders slumped and he opened and closed his mouth for a moment before frowning. “Where will you go if not to V-Tower?”

Valentino shrugged. “Probably the same street corners I made you stand at. I have to make money somehow.”

Angel fell silent and Vox and Velvette stared at their former partner worriedly.

“If I may suggest,” drawled Alastor. “A few decades ago I was impressed by your garden. It takes skill to make *anything* blossom in Hell, yet you had quite the talent for it. I assume that hasn’t changed...?”

Valentino brightened. “...Are you suggesting I try my hand at floristry?”

Alastor smirked. “Well, now you’re putting words in my mouth.”

“I do like flowers,” Valentino murmured to himself. “And I’ve always thought Hell could use a splash of colour...”

“...*You* used to garden?” Angel asked quietly and Valentino squeaked happily.

“I did! I stopped when I moved into V-Tower because... well, there was no garden.” He frowned. “Perhaps I should have noticed that earlier.” He stared at the wall thoughtfully. “I could make *hanging baskets* for people who live in tiny apartments. And pots! Oh, and bonsai, and those closed-system terrariums that people talk about. Always wanted to try making one of those...”

He wandered out of the hotel, muttering to himself about cacti and different species of moss and Vox bit back a laugh.

Maybe Valentino would be ok after all.

“So... Do I get an apology out of you?” Husk drawled as he glanced at Alastor.

Alastor blinked and plastered on a grin. “...Whatever for, my good man?”

Husk scowled. “For all the shit you put me through? The threats? *Owning my soul?*”

Alastor’s smile widened. “My dear Husker. I’m sorry for giving you a paid job and free rent in this lovely hotel. I’m sorry that my fearsome reputation protected you from all the gamblers that wanted your head. I’m sorry that I introduced you to such wonderful friends and that I saved you from being devoured by Roo.”

“*You* delivered me to her!”

“And I also helped you escape,” said Alastor with a grin. “*And* I sacrificed my own life to save yours and every other pitiful soul in Hell.”

Husk narrowed his eyes. “You’re an asshole.”

“And yet out of the two of us, I’m the one with the halo!”

Husk crossed his arms and grumbled beneath his breath as both Vox and Angel bit back laughter.

When he sobered, Vox turned to Lilith and his smile faded as he noticed that the queen hadn't moved in all the time that they had been talking to Valentino.

"How is this possible?" Vox asked. "How are Val and Lilith back?"

"They're all back," Lucifer replied, but he looked concerned. "Everyone who died in Purgatory, everyone who extinguished their own soul out of despair here, everyone who was influenced by her to kill someone else, everyone she *destroyed*... They've all returned." He frowned at his wife. "Except there is something *wrong* with them. Their souls are so small, fragments really. Barely visible. And they're all so *broken*. Lost. They have their memories but there's no joy left in any of them. No hope. They're like... shells of themselves, filled with misery and fear."

"Before you came, Valentino stood in that corner and didn't say a word to anyone," supplied Vaggie. "He barely seemed to recognise us. He didn't move, didn't speak, just... stared into space." She glanced at Lilith. "Like the queen."

Lucifer gestured for Vox and Alastor to follow and he pushed the doors open to allow them to see the street outside.

There were hundreds of sinners standing motionlessly in the middle of the street, staring into space, looking haunted and lost. People tried to catch their attention, to snap them out of their trance, and whilst they did respond, everything about them was sluggish and hollow, like they had been drained of energy and the will to *live*.

Lucifer shut the door.

"Roo's trophies," murmured Vox before he glanced at Alastor. "She said she took a little piece of everyone she fed from, their souls, and she kept them living in a loop of their worst moments, the reasons they *died*, until she drained every last drop of suffering from them."

Alastor blinked, eyes brightening as the epiphany struck. "And then she displayed them like trophies, lifeless but still trapped in that endless loop of pain." He glanced at Lilith. "She

released them but they've been trapped in that misery for so long that it's the only thing left of them."

"But Val perked up," Vox said, confused. "He got excited about the flowers."

Silence fell and finally, Charlie spoke up, face buried in her mother's chest.

"You gave him hope. Offered him love and kindness and empathy. Forgave him even when he felt that he didn't deserve it. You showed him the Virtues."

She looked up at her hollow-eyed mother. "That's the key. That's how we fix this. The Seven Virtues."

Lucifer straightened before his gaze softened and he joined his wife and daughter and wrapped his arms around them both. Lilith turned her head, studying him for a moment before her eyes sparked with recognition.

"Lucifer?" she asked, sounding distant.

"I'm here, my love," he whispered. "You're safe. I promise you're safe."

She seemed to wake a little more from her trance. "...This is real? I'm back in Hell?"

"Yes," Lucifer said as he cupped her cheek and curled his wings around his family. "You're home."

She blinked and looked down at her daughter in surprise as though she had only just realised who she was holding.

“Hi, Mom,” Charlie said with a watery smile.

“Charlie?” she whispered and her eyes widened. “You’ve grown.”

Charlie huffed a weak laugh and nodded and clutched her mother tighter. “I missed you.”

Lilith looked around the hotel, seeming confused, and as Charlie and Lucifer began to explain everything that had happened in the last few years, Alastor’s parents joined him and pulled him into a bone-crushing hug.

“Stupid boy,” sniffled his mother as she squeezed him. “We were so worried about you.”

“I’m fine, Mom,” Alastor said, cheeks flushing when Husk smirked at him in a way that said he would definitely be teasing his former master about this later.

“We’re damn proud of you, Alastor,” said Jacques warmly, yelping when Denise elbowed him in the side.

“Don’t encourage him,” she growled before glowering at Alastor and smacking him upside the head. “No more self-sacrificial *bullshit*, do you hear me, boy?”

Alastor rubbed his head, pouting. “Loud and clear.”

Denise turned her fiery gaze upon Vox. “That goes for you too. Now, I appreciate you keeping Allie safe, but next time, you’re to put your foot down and stop him from walking into the firing range, you hear? He thinks he’s clever, but he can be as stupid as his father at times.”

“Hey,” protested Alastor and Jacques in unison.

Vox tipped his head in acknowledgement. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t forget,” Denise huffed before she glowered at Alastor and pulled him in for another hug, dragging Vox in too.

“Does this mean you’re going to stay in Hell?” Alastor asked, trying to be nonchalant and failing miserably.

Denise clicked her tongue at him and Jacques squeezed his shoulder.

“Now that *is* a stupid question,” he said, winking, and Alastor melted against his mother and closed his eyes in relief.

“I suppose this hotel could do with a chef,” drawled Denise and both Jacques and Alastor’s ears pricked up in interest at the idea of her cooking. Vox grinned at them both and noticed Velvet and Rosie watching them from the bar. He gestured them over and Alastor brightened at their approach.

“Mom, Dad, allow me to properly introduce you to two very good friends of ours...”

The rioting had finally stopped and Heaven’s gates remained firmly open, allowing winners to leave and enter whenever they pleased. There were still guards for safety reasons, but Heaven’s gates were more akin to an airport terminal than a prison nowadays.

The Archangels were in a lot of trouble.

Sera had no idea who had revealed their past mistakes and scandals to the public.

Not officially, anyway. That was between her and the reporter who had sworn to keep her anonymous.

Sera had made a fair few mistakes of her own, but she was trying to rectify them. Until the Archangels found a way to dig themselves out of the hole they were in, the Seraphim were in charge. Emily, of course, embraced this new era of winners mingling with sinners, and Sir Pentious was by her side, as always, welcoming the freshly-redeemed with a warm smile and an enthusiastic tour.

Sera was somewhat slower to adapt to the change. She had spent so long hating demons that she found herself reluctant to join the other enthusiastic seraphim in their celebrations and welcome parties. Instead, she stuck to the paperwork that went with leading Heaven into a tentative truce with Hell, and she decided that Lucifer wasn't the worst person to work with, even if he talked about his duck collection more often than she cared for. That was, until she found out that it *wasn't* a euphemism and the strange Archangel did, in fact, have a room dedicated to ducks that he had made.

"There's a party at the hotel tonight. Six months since everyone came back. You should come."

Sera glanced up from her paperwork to see the Princess of Hell standing in front of her desk, her father and mother leaning against the doorway, observing.

Sera put her pen down and clasped her hands together delicately. "That is very kind of you, princess, but I'm rather busy."

"You're avoiding sinners," Charlie said bluntly.

Sera smiled tightly. "Yes. I doubt people have forgotten about the Exterminations I authorised, even if they are no longer in effect. In fact, I'm quite surprised you're extending any sort of invitation to me after what I did."

Charlie studied her for a moment before sighing. "Everyone makes mistakes. You made some terrible ones, but you also chose to stand up for both Heaven and Hell. In the end, you helped

to save my people.”

Sera arched an eyebrow. “You... forgive me? After everything I’ve done?”

“You kept the gates open when the Archangels tried to close them,” said Charlie. “You allowed Sinners to reunite with their families and friends. And I’m pretty sure you’re the one who spilled the beans about the Archangels.” She managed a smile. “Maybe you’re not as bad a person as I first thought. My dad says you’re easier to negotiate with than my uncles, at least.”

“I’m trying,” Sera said slowly. “I really do want Heaven to be a paradise.” She frowned at her paperwork. “It is a pity we still do not know how redemption works.”

“The Virtues seem like a good place to start,” Lucifer said with a shrug.

“Yes, but even they do not guarantee redemption,” argued Sera. “And there are thousands of angels here who have not completed the Virtues, yet have still earned a place in Heaven. It is... frustrating to be so uncertain of how souls achieve a place in Heaven or Hell.”

“Maybe it doesn’t really matter,” said Charlie. “Maybe the afterlife is less about *where* souls end up and more about the choices they make?”

Sera pulled a face. “Then what is the *point* in Good and Evil if it doesn’t matter where a soul lands? Does that mean that bad people can go to Heaven and good people can go to Hell?”

She thought about Adam and quickly fell silent, frowning to herself.

“Maybe?” said Charlie before throwing her hands up. “I don’t know. I don’t think we’ll ever know.”

“I think that’s the point,” said Lucifer. “I don’t think we’re *supposed* to know how it works, because it isn’t our place to judge souls.”

Sera frowned up at him. “But-” She cut herself off and sighed. “No, you’re right. We are here to guide winners and sinners, not judge them. It’s easy to forget that.”

Lucifer quirked a lopsided smirk.

Sera cast her gaze to Lilith and stared for a moment before offering a polite smile. “Your soul has grown a little more since I last saw you. How are you feeling?”

“A bit more like myself,” said Lilith quietly. “Three of the Seven Virtues complete now, I think.”

“It shows,” said Sera warmly. “It won’t be long until your soul is whole once more.”

Lilith tipped her head in gratitude and Charlie’s smile became a little more sincere.

“So, about that party?” she asked.

Sera shot her a wry look before giving in. “What time?”

“Fuck,” breathed Purgatory.

Roo shivered. There was something utterly *thrilling* about hearing Purgatory curse.

She bit deeper into the shoulder of the beautiful woman she had trapped in her roots. Her skin was dark and her hair fell in long, braided, black and gold strands down to her waist. Bruises coated her flesh and her body trembled as Roo squeezed her breast greedily and drove two fingers inside her dripping entrance.

Roo feasted upon her lust and pain and when the woman in her arms climaxed with a breathy cry, Roo devoured the extra energy and pushed her harder, biting at her neck instead and thrusting her fingers roughly inside her throbbing pussy and forcing her onto her knees as she pinched her nipples.

Purgatory's cheeks burned with humiliation as she moaned and whined and tried to pull away from Roo's ruthless fingers, but Roo refused to let her escape, and she ate up Purgatory's humiliation with a growl of satisfaction.

Finally, once she was satisfied, Roo released Purgatory and the smaller woman slumped onto her hands and knees, shaking as she struggled for breath, tears trickling down her cheeks.

Roo watched her with a worried frown. "I'm sorry," she said quietly as her gaze tracked over the bruises littering Purgatory's flawless skin. "I got carried away."

Purgatory huffed a laugh despite her tears. "Don't apologise, sweet Root. You have to feed." Her voice was deep and smoky.

"Yes, but I shouldn't be so greedy," Roo said as she crawled over the forest floor towards Purgatory. "You know, you don't have to entertain my hunger for Pain or Humiliation or any of the others. Lust is relatively harmless and a brief argument would suffice for Fury. I can get by without the others."

She touched a large bruise on Purgatory's back, grimacing at her pain even as she was fed by it.

Purgatory chuckled and turned to her, leaning back on her hands and looking very relaxed with her body fully exposed to Roo.

“I want to feel pain and humiliation and fear and *everything* you feed on,” she said, smiling. “I want to feel everything that humans and angels and demons feel. You make me feel like a person, Roo. I’ve never felt like that before. I’ve never felt this *alive*.”

Roo raised her eyebrows in surprise and something... fluttered in her chest.

“I don’t like hurting you,” Roo said. “And I’m... afraid that I’m taking advantage of you.” Her gaze flicked briefly between Purgatory’s open legs before returning to her face again.

Purgatory laughed. “How could you possibly be taking advantage of me when neither of us have done anything like this before? We are simply exploring. You have to feed and I can’t leave this place, so we must form some sort of arrangement.”

Roo swallowed, suddenly aware of the wetness between her own bare thighs. “From what I understand, sex is usually reserved for lovers, and acts of pain and humiliation during sex are quite rare, being performed by certain types of people who trust each other deeply.”

“I trust you,” Purgatory said innocently as she took Roo’s hand into one of hers. “And you appear to trust me.”

Roo’s eyes widened, cheeks flushing. “Well, yes, but that isn’t... We aren’t... You are merely doing this to keep me from starving.”

“Of course,” Purgatory agreed as her other hand curled around Roo’s calf, squeezing affectionately. “I couldn’t possibly have you going hungry on me when I can provide you with a meal.”

Roo stared at her. She was unfairly gorgeous with her golden irises and plump lips and the smattering of golden freckles beneath her eyes and-

What was she thinking? She had never had thoughts like this before. She had never felt so *weak* just by having someone's attention on her. She could hear her own heart pumping, could feel her control on her roots slipping. She wanted to touch Purgatory, to devour her and claim her and feast upon her, but not only on her emotions, no, she wanted to brush her lips against her flesh and lap at her wetness and-

What was happening to her?

What were these thoughts and desires?

Purgatory's smile faded at Roo's panicked expression and her palm cupped Roo's cheek as she frowned worriedly.

"Are you alright? I can feel your distress."

Roo panted a little. "Something is wrong."

Purgatory straddled her quickly and cupped both of her cheeks with narrowed eyes. "Tell me," she demanded. "Tell me what's wrong and I will do my best to fix it. You are safe here, Root. I promise I'll keep you safe."

The fluttery feeling in her chest happened again and Roo's eyes widened as her fingers wrapped around Purgatory's hips possessively.

"I... I don't know what it is. When I look at you, when I *touch* you, I feel..." She trailed off, unsure how to explain what she felt, and Purgatory brushed a thumb over her lips and waited patiently for her to continue.

She was so *warm*. Roo tugged her closer until their bodies were flush and she eyed her round breasts for a long moment before giving into one of her strange thoughts. She wrapped her lips around a nipple and sucked leisurely and Purgatory tangled her fingers in her hair and watched curiously.

“Are you still hungry?” she asked, surprised.

“No,” Roo murmured. “I just... want to touch you.” She lapped at her breast and ran one hand over Purgatory’s soft stomach and up to her chest, squeezing her other breast before curling her fingers around the back of her neck.

Purgatory made a soft sound of interest and tugged gently at Roo’s hair. Roo bit at her breast and Purgatory moaned before sliding her free hand between Roo’s legs and teasing at her clit.

Roo pulled back to stare at Purgatory for a moment before dragging her into a messy, open-mouthed kiss and Purgatory shoved her back against the soft grass and fingered her open.

Roo moaned into her mouth and Purgatory smiled in amusement against her lips. “It’s okay to ask for more,” Purgatory whispered. “If you’re still hungry, you can tell me. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable. I want you to be happy, Root.”

“I’m not hungry,” Roo insisted.

“Then why are you writhing beneath me like that?” Purgatory teased. “I keep telling you, I don’t mind you asking for more. I know you think you’re doing something wrong by inducing pain or lust or fear in me, but I *want* to feel those things. You make me feel *so much*, Root. Not just the things you feed off, either. Your company brings me joy and fondness and curiosity. When I’m with you, I feel things that I never thought I’d be capable of. You make me happy and sad and angry and amused and a thousand other things, and I’m *addicted* to it. To *you*.”

Purgatory gripped her hair tighter. “You are the most beautiful creature I have ever had the privilege of knowing and I would do *anything* to make you happy.”

Roo swallowed.

A bell tolled.

A pair of gates appeared to their left, looking odd in the thick forest.

Purgatory froze.

“Oh,” she said, smile falling before she mustered up a false one. “Congratulations. You’ve completed the trials.”

There was fear and pain behind her eyes, unlike anything Roo had ever seen there before. Her heart clenched and she suddenly felt nauseous.

“You finally learned to accept yourself for who you are,” said Purgatory weakly. “To *love* yourself.”

Roo frowned in confusion. That felt... wrong. She glanced at the gate and the seven lights on its left post and when Purgatory tried to pull away from her, to *release* her, she growled and clutched Purgatory tighter, a strange sense of fear seizing her chest at the thought of losing the woman above her.

“You’re free to go,” Purgatory said, subdued. “You’ve completed the trials. All that’s left for you to do is pass through those gates.”

“And then what?” Roo hissed. “I lose you? I get kicked out of here and live alone for the rest of eternity? What sort of freedom is that?”

Purgatory blinked, surprised. “You don’t know that. You don’t know what awaits you beyond those gates. Perhaps you’ll gain a soul? Perhaps you could live life amongst the humans-”

“And I’ll never see you again!” Roo snapped.

Purgatory was silent for a few seconds. "I'm just a programme."

"Not to me," Roo growled, holding Purgatory tighter. "You mean far more than that. You are my friend, my confidant, my guide, the person I trust with every part of me, the creature that accepts me as I am-"

She cut herself off as the epiphany hit her and she whipped her gaze to the gate again. "Love," she murmured to herself. "The final trial."

Purgatory brushed her fingers along Roo's jaw. "I'm proud of you. You've come so far. You've finally learned to love who you are."

Roo narrowed her eyes and suddenly flipped their positions, pinning Purgatory beneath her. "Sometimes it *is* about love for another," she muttered and Purgatory frowned at her for a moment before her eyes widened and Roo kissed her hard on the mouth.

When they parted, Purgatory trembled beneath Roo.

"You could escape," she whispered. "You could finally set yourself free."

"My paradise is here," Roo whispered as she wrapped a greedy hand around Purgatory's waist and weaved her fingers into her hair. "If you'll let me stay."

A tear rolled down Purgatory's cheek as she wound her arms around Roo. "You'd give up your freedom for me? I... I'm not even a *person*."

"Neither am I," Roo breathed as she let her roots wrap around Purgatory's body, holding, cradling, caressing, sliding between her legs and fucking into her slowly.

Purgatory arched and whined and Roo swallowed her sweet moans and rocked onto her own roots, body moving in harmony with Purgatory's as she held her tight and refused to let go.

"I'm yours," Roo managed as she nipped at Purgatory's lips. "I've always been yours. I've always been powerless against you."

Purgatory shivered and Roo inhaled sharply as she felt Purgatory's magic slide into her, wrapping around her like a blanket, swallowing her whole, intertwining with her own magic like it had in the first Purgatory. She was so *powerful*. Roo had forgotten how overwhelming her power could be.

"Devour me," growled Purgatory and through their intertwined magic, Roo could hear her every thought, feel every emotion, and she yanked Purgatory's head to the side and bit into her neck and moaned at her combined pain and lust.

Purgatory clawed at her back as Roo fucked them both harder with her thick, smooth roots, and Roo pressed her lips against the bruise on her lover's neck.

"I love you," she hissed and Purgatory cried out as she came, watching hungrily as Roo followed shortly after.

Roo collapsed on top of her and startled when Purgatory rolled her onto her back with a growled "*Mine*."

She tossed her head back in a breathy groan as Purgatory buried her face between her legs and lapped at the mess dripping from her. Once she was finished, she crawled up Roo's body once more and fell on top of her, kissing her deeply on the mouth.

When they parted, Purgatory cupped her cheek and Roo threw her legs around her waist.

Purgatory smiled adoringly and brushed her thumb over Roo's swollen, spit-slicked lips as their chests heaved.

“Teach me how to love you, sweet Root.”

Vox raked his gaze over his reflection with a critical eye. He considered switching to his human form but decided against it.

He didn't have to hide from Alastor. Alastor loved his mechanical body just as much as his human one.

A silhouette peeked out from behind his mirror and Vox's grin widened when it fanned itself dramatically with its own hand and pretended to faint.

“Is *that* what you're wearing?”

Vox turned and arched an eyebrow at Alastor, who leaned against the door frame as he observed Vox.

“You said casual dress code,” Vox reminded and Alastor quirked a lopsided smirk as he strolled into the room and brushed his fingers over Vox's exposed forearm and tapped at the sleeve rolled to his elbow. He hummed and his fingers continued the journey up a black sleeve, over the shoulder of a blue, silk waistcoat, before trailing over Vox's collarbone and down to the 'v' of his partially unfastened shirt.

“I did,” purred Alastor, making Vox shiver, and his hands automatically sought his lover's hips. Alastor looked *incredible* in his black shirt, black trousers and his deep, crimson blazer. No tie, no waistcoat, and with his top button unfastened... Damn. Vox felt as flustered as a Victorian man being shown a sliver of a woman's bare ankle.

“This is casual,” Vox murmured as he drank in the picture of his gorgeous lover.

“Perhaps a little too casual,” drawled Alastor as he traced a pattern into the small slip of skin visible at Vox’s chest. “I don’t want to have to fight people off you during our date.”

Vox commanded his skin to turn transparent. “There. Now you won’t have a problem,” he teased.

Alastor’s eyes flashed with interest and he took Vox’s arm gently and drew his fingers along one of the glowing circuit traces. “You really are beautiful, Vox.”

Vox’s screen tinted pink at the sincere compliment and Alastor smirked knowingly at him before bringing his knuckles to his lips.

“Come, my love,” Alastor whispered. “They won’t hold our reservation for long.”

Alastor coaxed him towards the door and when he turned, Vox grinned at the fluffy tail peeping out from beneath his jacket. He slipped his hand into Alastor’s and let his lover lead the way to the restaurant.

Vox thumbed circles into Alastor’s knuckles as he listened to his lover talk about a caller that had irked him during his radio show that morning, and he studied Alastor’s relaxed ears and the downwards tilt of his lips that were no longer sewn into a smile.

Alastor gestured theatrically with his other hand, using it to elaborate his story, and Vox’s smile widened. They were alike in so many ways...

He snaked his arm around Alastor’s waist and nudged their hips together and Alastor adapted to the new position easily, not pausing for breath as he curled an arm around Vox and continued.

Vox loved this man with all of his heart.

They arrived at the restaurant and were promptly seated at a table, where Vox ordered a bottle of wine and water for them both and tried not to let it show on his face that Alastor was playing footsie with him under the table.

“You know, I was a little anxious about tonight,” Vox admitted.

Alastor tilted his head in surprise and trailed a finger over Vox’s knuckles. He was being very tactile this evening. Perhaps he had sensed Vox’s nerves and knew touch was the most efficient way to calm him. Knowing exactly what one another needed was almost instinctive to them both these days.

“Oh? Why’s that, my handsome Picturebox?”

Vox’s screen flushed pink again and Alastor smirked. He knew *exactly* what he was doing. Asshole.

Sweet asshole.

“Well, it feels like every time we try to take each other to dinner, something bad happens,” Vox said. “We either get interrupted or we make plans that get thrown off, or... or we get attacked or threatened or we end up *fighting* each other-” He cut himself off with a frown and Alastor looked thoughtful for a moment before nodding slowly.

“...I must admit, you aren’t *wrong*. ”

“I’ve been putting off inviting you here for a few weeks now,” Vox confessed. “I was so sure something would go terribly, horribly wrong.”

Alastor took Vox’s hand into his own, rubbing his thumb over the back of his palm. “Nothing is going to happen, my dear. For the first time ever, neither of us are in any danger.”

“That’s what you think, you piece of shit!”

Alastor and Vox startled and turned to find a reptilian demon and what appeared to be four members of his similar-looking family aiming guns at both Vox and Alastor from the table beside theirs.

The reptilian demon closest to them grinned wickedly and turned his gun on Vox as he and his family stood. “You aren’t an Overlord anymore. You aren’t even a demon. I’m going to enjoy putting a fucking bullet through that smug screen.”

Vox blinked placidly. “...Do I know you?”

The sinner blinked then gritted his teeth. “You had me on your chain for *thirty years*, and you don’t even recognise me? I *worked* for you.” He turned the gun to Alastor. “And *you*. You killed my father!”

Alastor smiled lazily. “He probably deserved it.”

“I did not! Fuck you, cannibal asshole!” piped up one of the sinners behind the one who couldn’t decide whether to shoot Vox or Alastor.

“I must insist, ladies and gentlemen, if you wish to fight these men then you must do it *outside*,” began the waiter that had served Vox and Alastor. He received a bullet to the head for his troubles and collapsed beside their table.

Alastor blinked down at him and Vox noted that there was nothing angelic or magical about the bullet. He cast his gaze back to the family of lizard-demons.

“So, you want to shoot me because I gave you a job?” Vox drawled.

“I want to shoot you because *I’m* going to be the biggest Overlord in the Entertainment District and I’m going to kill the bastards that *used* to run the show before they became weak little winners,” crowed the sinner eagerly.

Alastor propped his chin on his hand in amusement as Vox bit back a laugh.

“Is that so?” Alastor purred.

“It is,” grinned the reptile-sinner as he flicked the safety off his gun. “Hold onto your halos, boys, this is going to hurt *a lot*.”

The rest of the family levelled their weapons at Vox and Alastor, some of them automatic.

Vox flicked his gaze to Alastor. “Every time,” he said incredulously. “We aren’t meant to eat out.”

“Hm. Speak for yourself,” drawled Alastor as he eyed the lizard-sinners. “I have a feeling I’m going to eat *very* well tonight.”

The sinners didn’t notice Alastor’s silhouette rising up beside their table with a deranged grin, nor did they notice the shadows around the room starting to close in.

They *did* notice the flickering lights however, and they looked up warily.

“I suppose,” Vox said, “that some things never change.”

“You can’t fix stupid,” agreed Alastor as his smile grew into something sinister, making a few of the lizard-sinners retreat a step.

“See, we might be angels,” Vox said as charge crackled over his body, and the lights around the restaurant flickered faster.

“But we aren’t very *good* at it,” chuckled Alastor.

Vox discharged a burst of electricity into the nearest light and every bulb in the room shattered, plunging the restaurant into total darkness.

Screams filled the air.

Alastor and Vox laughed with delight.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: spicy scene between Roo and Purgatory

That's all folks!

Thank you for sticking with me to the end! This is the longest fic I've ever written but it was a pleasure to write every word. Thank you to all of your supportive comments and those who provided constructive criticism.

If you enjoyed this fic, there is an offshoot fic in the works where Val makes different choices. It will be a Vox/Al/Val fic and it WILL be much shorter, but it's going to be filled with jealousy and angst and learning how to navigate a rather complicated relationship. If you didn't enjoy this fic... Why did you read all 400+k words of it? ;)

Art links below. If you have drawn any art for this fic and your links have updated or you've switched social media, shoot me a comment. Thank you very much to all of you talented artists who have drawn for this fic.

Hopefully, I'll see you in the next one!

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